

Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

Vol. 66 No. 4 2022



Circus Historical Society

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Mission Statement

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About the Covers Pyrotechnic Equestrienne Ascensions

The equine-based society of the early 20th century must have been thunderstruck by circus advertising depicting horses lifted high overhead by hot-air balloons amid brilliant cascades of fireworks. Poster creators at the Erie Lithograph and Printing Company did a superb job of illustrating one such circus presentation with the 1911 artwork featured on the cover of this issue of *Bandwagon*. The fiery rendering – one of Erie's early designs – was crafted for use as a 6-sheet lithograph, but there is no known surviving example of such a poster.

Kiddo the balloon horse, ridden by "Miss Arline," was heavily promoted in newspapers by Sells-Floto in 1911. The horse that season was occasionally identified as Omar, but still ridden by equestrienne Arline Roberts in Sells-Floto performances.¹ Sells-Floto continued featuring a balloon horse ascension as late as 1914.

This bewildering type of act appears to have originated on Barnum & Bailey in 1908 with Wotan the balloon horse. Jupiter was the big feature beginning in 1909 – the name of the equine apparently being changed. The Barnum & Bailey lithograph on *Bandwagon's* back cover is a splendid representation of the act that debuted in Chicago:

"...Jupiter, a beautiful white Arabian, ridden by a daring young woman, takes position on the platform attached to the balloon. This platform has no railing, and in no way is the horse fastened. The balloon ascends to the dome of the Coliseum and then descends amid a shower of fireworks. The act is picturesque and thrilling when one realizes that the slightest nervousness on the part of the horse would prove serious to the rider and the animal."²



Other descriptions of the Jupiter phenomenon noted a "Niagara of falling fire," a "volcano of flames and fire-stars," and "a veil of down-pouring sparks enveloping the horse and rider." That rider was originally cited to be Mrs. Ray Thompson who allegedly began training the act in 1906. In 1910, "the young woman in the saddle" who was "dressed in white from shoes to hat" was said to be Madam Raphael. By 1911, 30-year-old Nettie Carroll was astride the snow-white Jupiter.

It remains a mystery how such horses were trained to stand without so much as flinching during the obvious bedlam.

1. "Sells-Floto Shows Here," *The Daily Telegram* (Long Beach, California), Apr. 19, 1911, p. 1.

2. "Big Circus Coming as Sign of Spring," *The Inter Ocean* (Chicago), Mar. 29, 1909, p. 10.

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The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

2022 Volume 66, Number 4

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Bandwagon: The Journal of the Circus Historical Society (USPS 406-390) (ISSN 0005-4968) is published quarterly by the Circus Historical Society for its members. © 2022

Office of Publication

1075 West Fifth Avenue,
Columbus OH 43212. Periodical postage paid at Columbus OH and additional entry offices. Postmaster: send all address changes to Bandwagon: The Journal of the Circus Historical Society, 1075 West Fifth Avenue, Columbus OH 43212.

Membership

Circus Historical Society annual membership is \$60.00 in the United States, \$80.00 in Canada and for U.S. First Class, and \$105.00 for international members. Membership application and information are available on the CHS website at www.circushistory.org or contact

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Website and Back Issues

An index of *Bandwagon* articles from earlier issues is available online at www.circushistory.org. Back issues are available from the Office of Publication.

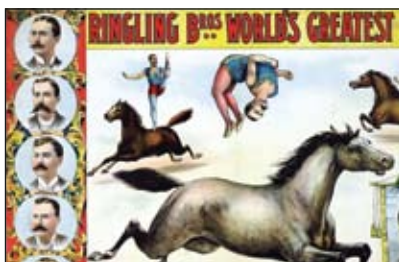


Table of Contents

About the Covers	2
From the Editor	4
From the President	5
When Is a Circus Not a Circus <i>A Yankee Circus on Mars Goes to Court</i> by Betsy Golden Kellem	8
There Used to Be a Circus Here The New York Hippodrome by Chris Berry	14
Enriching a Family Legacy Lou Ann and Dolly Jacobs <i>From Sarasota to Stardom</i> by Julie Parkinson	28
An 1892 Ringling Bros. Courier Poster Set by Greg Parkinson	42
Bigger than Life by Chris Berry	46
John Pugh A Lifetime with the Circus <i>Part VI – 1976-1982</i> by Lane Talburt	58
Dutch Treat: The Fanciful Footwork of Miss Loni <i>Part III</i> by Timothy Noel Tegge	76

From the Editor

Circus Partings

During the early 1920s when Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was still ending its performances with thrilling hip-podrome races, the show's souvenir programs included a short piece titled "Sport of Ancient Rome". The article ended with the following words:

The Show is o'er – the races run –
"All out and over," rings the cry.
The lights are lowered, one by one;
The crowds depart – "Good-night – good-bye!"

In my imagination, I can see the townsfolk heading for the exit as the lights are starting to be lowered and the tear-down gets underway. It is a heart-warming contemplation, but good-bye is not something meant for the circus.

Yes, as Bruce Hawley has announced on the opposite page, I will be stepping down as the Editor of *Bandwagon* at the end of February. It will be another circus parting of sorts for me, but not good-bye. In a sense, John Ringling North's program signature "Thank you and Au Revoir" is more in line with how I feel. It is the au revoir part – *until we meet again*.

"May all your days be circus days!" Another great parting sentiment for the circus given to us by publicist Jack

Ryan in 1969. However, this is not the foremost thought presently on my mind.

I first served as ringmaster at Circus World Museum during the summer of 1978. Within a few years that assignment grew into contracting and directing CWM's big top shows, work that continued throughout my tenure as Executive Director until 2002. After the conclusion of the final closing-day performance during each and every one of those 25 years, the band always broke into the traditional *Auld Lang Syne*. It was always an emotional time for those who had been "with it and for it." Often cast members and others had a tear or two in their eyes as the admiring crowd applauded the artists' season-long contributions. I too felt that melancholy. But again, this is not the sense I have in anticipation of the end of my run as editor.

"Should old acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind?" Of course not! To the contrary, I will reflect dearly on the authors and associates I have worked with, some who I have identified as friends for more than 50 years.

The most accurate parting circus sentiment for me is simply, "See you down the road." No lasting good-byes. No tears. Just the certainty that our paths will cross again. Perhaps it will be next year at the convention in Normal. Perhaps on another circus lot or at a future performance. Or conceivably it will be in words yet to be written and shared.

So, until we meet again, my heartfelt congratulations to Kat Vecchio and continued happy reading to one and all!



The Circus Historical Society (CHS) relies on both dues and donations from members for operational costs, website maintenance, the annual convention, and its signature publication, *Bandwagon*. CHS dues have been the same since 2012 even though our expenses have increased substantially. Dues invoices are sent to members either by email or – if requested – by USPS mail, 30 days before their annual renewal date. Please consider making a donation today. Every amount makes a difference! Visit the Donate section at <circushistory.org> or send a check with the enclosed donation form.



Kat Vecchio to succeed Greg Parkinson as Bandwagon Editor in 2023

Since January 2018, Greg Parkinson has edited over 100 articles and more than 1,600 pages of *Bandwagon*. His enormous contributions to preserving circus history in his roles as Editor of *Bandwagon* for the last 5 years and as Executive Director of the Circus World Museum for 17 years from 1985 to 2002 have been immeasurable!

To have more time to spend with his family, which includes ten grandchildren, and to work on other writing projects, however, Greg has decided that he will resign from his role as Editor of *Bandwagon* after the first issue of 2023.

Fortunately, we did not have to look too far to find Greg's successor. I am pleased to announce that Kat Vecchio, who has been a member of the Circus Historical Society for years and a member of the CHS Board of Trustees since 2020, has agreed to assist Greg with the first issue next year and to become the Editor of *Bandwagon* beginning with the second issue in 2023! CHS vice president Chris Berry will continue to serve as Associate Editor of *Bandwagon*.

Kat is a writer and documentary filmmaker whose work centers on American popular culture, history, and gender. She has presented on the topic of circus women in early film at a recent CHS convention, and on circus women and domesticity for the Ringling Museum of Art. Kat's articles have appeared in *Bandwagon*, as well as online at *Narratively*, an award-winning longform journalism website, and *Atlas Obscura*, an online magazine devoted to discovery and exploration.

Until recently, she was the Chief Creative Officer at Fork Films, a nonfiction media company in New York City, and co-producer of the documentary *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*. She holds a master's degree in Liberal Studies from the City University of New York Graduate Center with a concentration in biography, and a bachelor's degree in Theatre from Smith College.

Please join me in thanking Greg for his outstanding service to the Circus Historical Society and in congratulating Kat on her upcoming role as Editor of *Bandwagon*!

Bruce Hawley
President
Circus Historical Society



Greg Parkinson



Kat Vecchio

Line up early!
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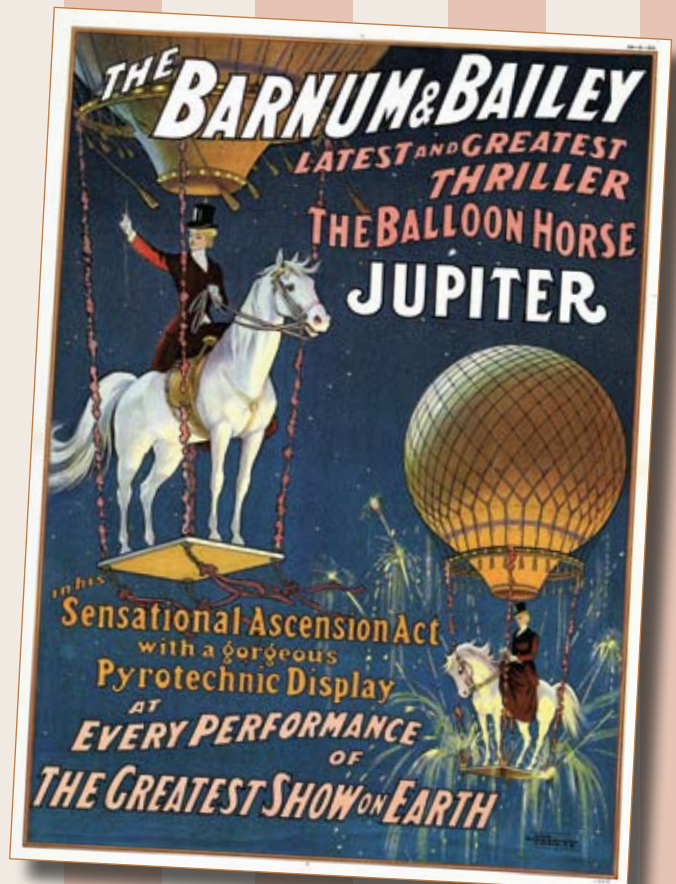
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When Is a Circus Not a Circus?

A Yankee Circus on

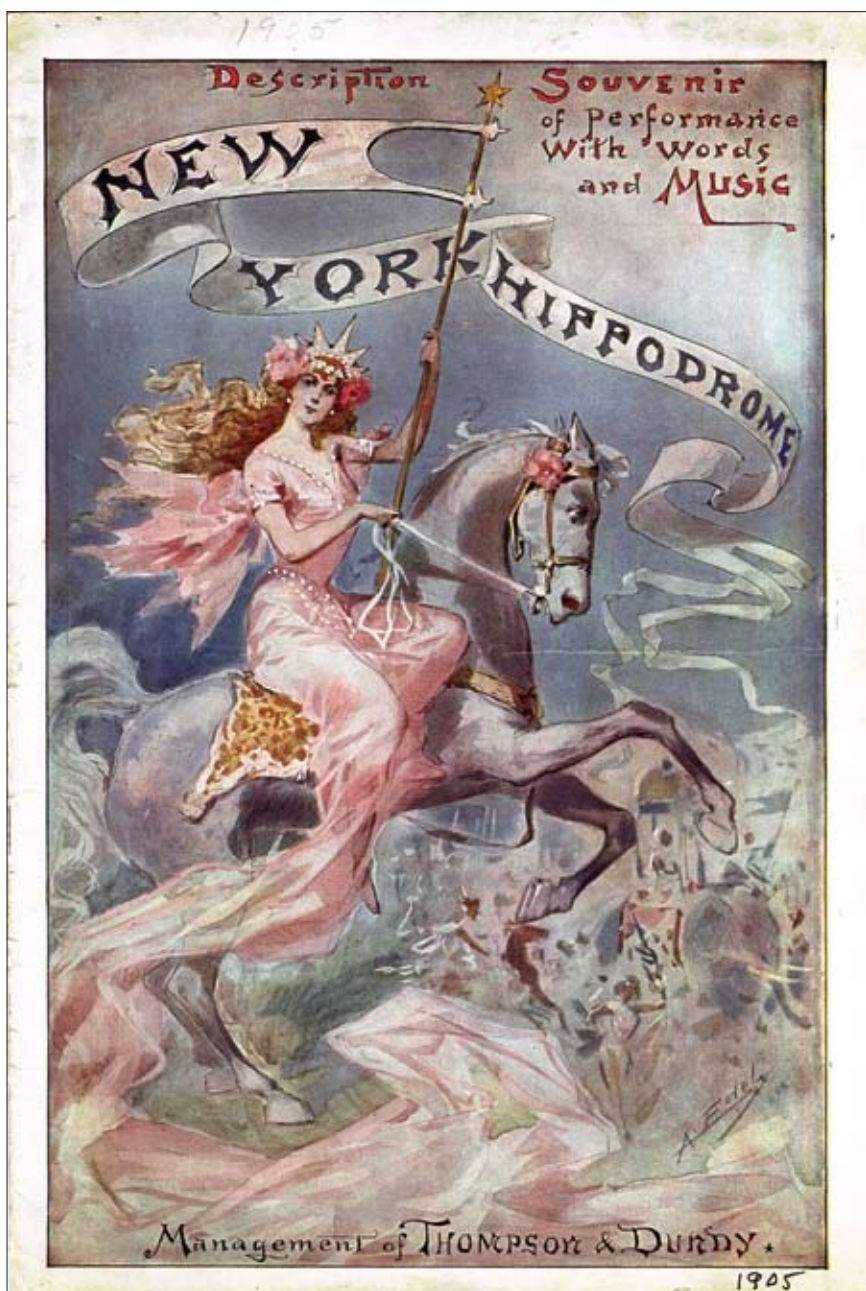
In March 1906, a Chicago court heard a case in which the entrepreneurs behind the theatrical spectacle *A Yankee Circus on Mars* argued that, the show's marquee notwithstanding, their show was not a circus at all. In response, the City of Chicago tried to convince the judge that this show

– an all-star assortment of well-known circus performers gathered to delight theater audiences – could not be anything *but* a circus. In the process of deciding whether this particular entertainment was at its heart a stage drama or a sawdust spectacle, the parties were really trying to solve a very basic question about who got stuck with a tax bill; but they raise the bigger question in circus fans' hearts: what really does make a circus a circus?

The New York Hippodrome, a theatrical venue in midtown Manhattan, between 43rd and 44th streets on 6th Avenue (not far from Bryant Park today), was touted as the largest theatre of its kind worldwide when it opened in 1905. The venue seated more than 5,000 people and boasted a stage large enough to hold a thousand performers. Over its lifetime, the Hippodrome hosted all sorts of performances, from stage shows to opera and boxing matches. It was demolished in 1939.¹

The Hippodrome was managed by amusement entrepreneurs Frederic Thompson and Elmer S. "Skip" Dundy, perhaps best known for their World's Fair attractions and for establishing Coney Island's Luna Park. Well experienced within the variety entertainment industry (and, on the more unfortunate side, notorious for the grim execution of the elephant Topsy at their park in 1903²), in the early years of the 20th century the men were itchy to expand their portfolio and decided on the theater business, long an ambition of Thompson's.³ Parks come and go; fairs eventually close; but a theater, well managed, could not only last longer but welcome throngs of middle-class patrons and their ticket money to an attraction in the then-vacant space between cheap vaudeville and fine theater.

Backed by financier John "Bet-a-Million" Gates⁴ and indelibly braided through with Thompson's backlot sensibilities, the Hippodrome venture opened its doors in 1905 with a banner performance of a show called *A Yankee Circus on Mars*, a freewheeling half-circus, half-opera in which the King of Mars comes to Earth to save a failing New England circus.⁵



New York Hippodrome program and songster, 1905

Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

by Betsy Golden Kellem

Mars Goes to Court



The enormous New York Hippodrome opened on April 12, 1905 with the production of *A Yankee Circus on Mars*.

Chris Berry Collection

The show was an extravagant spectacle and featured an ensemble of hundreds of actors, lavish costumes, and gigantic set pieces that took full advantage of the Hippodrome's sprawling stage and state-of-the-art technology.

The show was premised on an innovative concept for the early 20th century: take the best acts then circulating in the circus community and bring them together in a sort of greatest-hits performance, conducted inside a theater. This allowed audiences – particularly those who might have previously found the New York theater scene elitist or too expensive – to experience the thrill of the tented

circus with the comforts of a luxury theater in the city. Advertising emphasized exactly this aspect of the show, promising patrons “comfortable plush-lined orchestra chairs” and arguing that the muddy uncertainty of old tent shows was a thing of the past: “if it rains during the performance – what’s the difference? There’s a roof over your head.”⁶

The plot of *A Yankee Circus on Mars* was fantasy in excess. As lights dim and the curtain rises, a Vermont circus is opening for the season and it is in bad shape: the show is nearly bankrupt, the side-show performers are boil-



The half-circus and half-opera stage show was one of staggering proportions with hundreds of performers, lavish costumes and gigantic set pieces.

Chris Berry Collection



The Hippodrome was built by Frederic Thompson and Elmer "Skip" Dundy who had previously teamed to create Luna Park at Coney Island. Thompson is seen at his desk with a grouping of his amusement park renderings.

Library of Congress

ing with displeasure over their unpaid salaries, and the local sheriff has arrived to auction off the show for whatever meat he can pry from its bones. Suddenly a spaceship arrives with a delegation from King Borealis of Mars, looking to bring back some entertainment for the Red Planet. Mars, according to the script, is an entertainment paradise where folks prioritize nonstop fun – nothing like dour Earth where folks do nothing but work for a living. The Martian delegation somehow pays the circus' bills and whisks the performers away to Mars where folks have not forgotten how to have a good time, and where King Borealis eventually falls in love with a circus performer.⁷ The show featured an ensemble of hundreds of actors, wearing luxurious robes and frolicking amidst 50-foot dragon sculptures, live elephants, and lush gardens. After intermission, viewers were treated to a Civil War play, during which cavalry rode horses into a giant on-stage pool in a re-enactment of the Battle of Andersonville.⁸ The performance, front to back, ran for four hours.

Thompson's biographer, Woody Register, summarized many critics' opinions when he wrote that *A Yankee Circus on Mars* appears to have been concocted as a practical excuse for the circus performances rather than as a narrative incorporating such entertainments.⁹ And, if anyone was paying close attention, the conceptual framework of the *Yankee Circus* bore no small similarity to "A Trip to the Moon," Thompson's famous dark ride at Luna Park.¹⁰ But the acts were so thrilling, the glow of a proscenium theater such a delightful escape, no one really cared whether the plot held up.¹¹

The show was a smash hit and quickly made a name for the Hippodrome. One newspaper wrote that "In the two short months since its opening the big New York Hippodrome has become a feature of New York life, and is now

looked upon by residents and visitors as an old established institution as much to be regularly patronized as the Subway."¹² Coverage claimed evening performances had been sold out since opening night, and the matinees were pretty close to that mark. Figures suggested 400,000 tickets had been sold.¹³

So, naturally, Thompson and Dundy decided it might be a good idea to send the show on the road. Throughout 1906 the show appeared in Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago – cities with venues and potential crowds large enough to support the massive show. According to tour coverage, the show cost \$10,000 to put on every week but made as much back in its first two performances.¹⁴ It was nonetheless a financial and logistical challenge simply due to its size and scale; *The New York Times* described the company leaving from the old Grand Central with "Three hundred and



A Yankee Circus on Mars featured numerous circus acts including German wild animal trainer Claire Heliot with her large group of African lions.

The Ringling, Tibbals Circus Collection

ten persons, eight elephants, eighteen lions, thirty horses and ponies,” plus “a box or two of pythons.”¹⁵ Lights remained on at the Hippodrome even as its flagship show went on tour; Thompson and Dundy arranged a second similar show, *A Society Circus*, to take over in the New York space.¹⁶

The promoters employed a rotating cast of high-profile circus acts in New York and on tour, ranging from aerialists, animal acts, bicyclists, clowns, acrobats and more. Claire Heliot joined the tour with her dazzling big-cat act, walking lions across tightropes during intermission; champion trick shooter Colonel Gaston Bordevery concluded his act by “disrobing a young lady by a rifle ball.”¹⁷ The Cottrell-Powell equestrian act joined Marceline the English clown, Barlow’s elephants, the O’Meers sisters on wire-walk, and more.¹⁸

Bally could be heard throughout the lobby, shouts calling:

“Step up, ladies and gentlemen, for the big show is about to begin – the marvel of marvels, the greatest and most stupendous aggregation of scenic, sartorial, acrobatic, and animalistic wonders the world has yet produced. See *A Yankee Circus on Mars* and be glad that you are alive – it gleams, it glistens, it scintillates, it surprises, it dumfounds [sic], it dazes by its bigness. It is a dozen musical comedy choruses rolled into one, it is a Barnum & Bailey tent show from grand entrée to concert, presented on one stage and for a comparatively small sum. Step up, step up, step up: see, marvel, and be happy, for tomorrow you may be slugged.”¹⁹

And then in Chicago, legal requirements challenged the show’s seemingly unstoppable momentum. Under local ordinance, performing shows were required to pay li-



One of the most popular performers to appear in A Yankee Circus on Mars was Isidro Marcelino Orbés Casanova. Known professionally simply as Marceline, the Spanish clown was greatly admired by English comic actor Charlie Chaplin and appeared in many productions at the New York Hippodrome.

Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

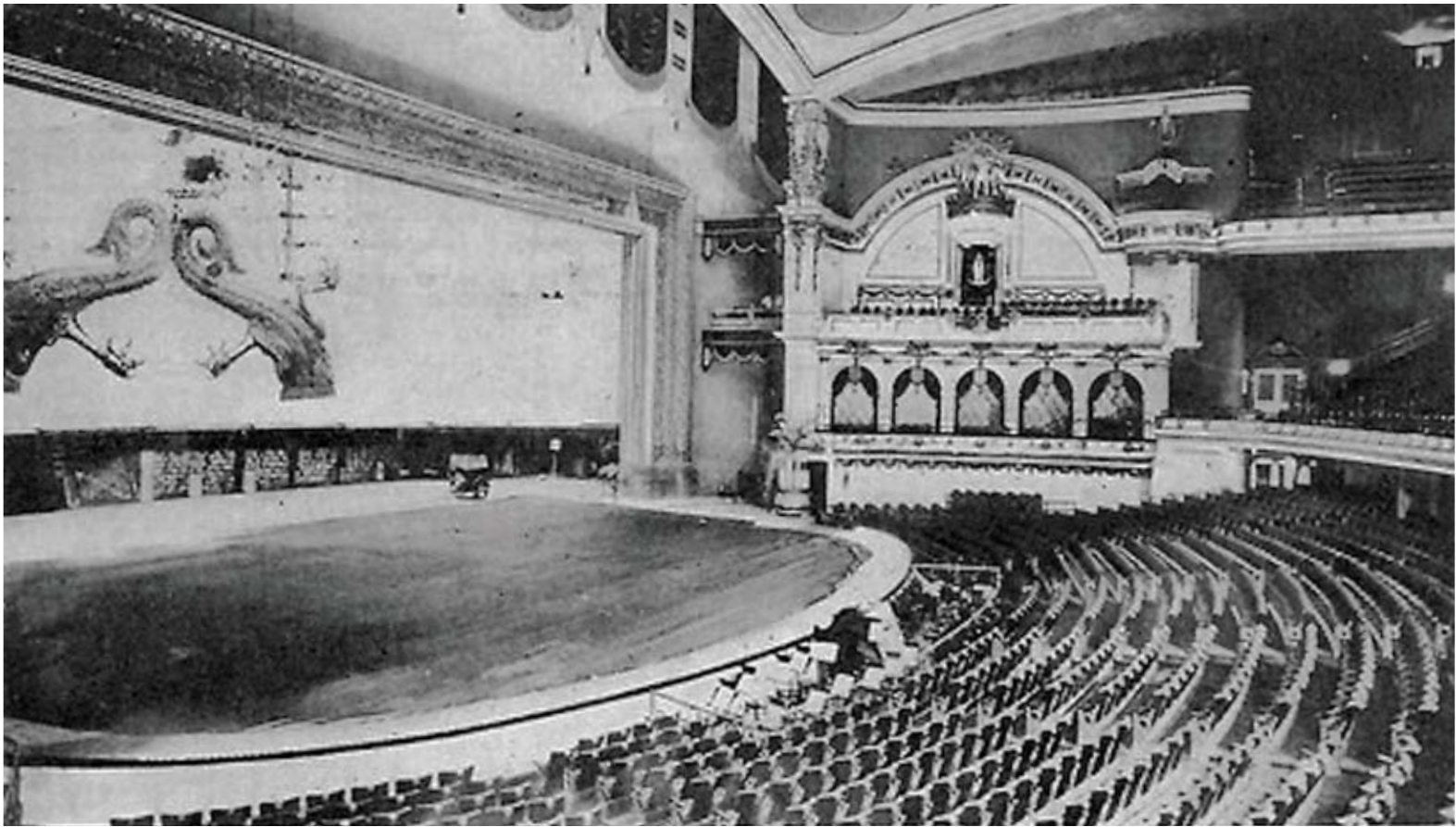
cense fees as part of their cost of doing business. Circuses, being mostly traveling shows, were typically charged \$100 a day, where stage shows paid a flat annual fee of \$500.²⁰ Essentially, the City of Chicago wanted to ensure it made a few hundred dollars whether a given performance was set up for a theatrical run or just in town for a few days. Chicago authorities classified the *Yankee Circus* as a circus, and wanted \$100 daily – and understandably the backers, in town for a good long run, preferred the five hundred. To achieve their goal, the Hippodrome team had to argue that their *Yankee Circus* was not, in fact, a circus at all.

Counsel appealed to superior court Judge W. M. McEwen’s²¹ sense of nostalgia and argued that surely a stage show with velvet seats was not anything like what he would remember of his boyhood trips to the circus: “Will your honor hark back to the day when you were a boy?” asked the lawyer. “Then your honor will remember the smell of sawdust, and the turf ring, the con and the lady bare back rider. They, like pink lemonade, are indispensable [sic] adjuncts to a circus. But, I assume, your honor, there are no peanuts sold in the

Auditorium.”²²

Some suggested that it was the absence of a stage or scenery that defined a circus. Others said circuses had to have elephants. The City’s attorney argued that the *Yankee* show had to be a circus, since it had no plot, and “the animals are largely the whole thing.” Counsel for the show responded that circuses had wild and exotic animals, and that since all the *Yankee Circus*’ animals were born in captivity, they were in truth domesticated. He argued that “A circus means a fat lady, and an ossified man, not a refined, and instructive entertainment.”²³

To be clear, the *Yankee Circus* backers were absolutely and purposefully talking out of both sides of their mouths.



When it first opened, the Hippodrome was advertised as the largest theatre in the world with seating for more than 5,000.

Everything about their show was selected and constructed to evoke nostalgia for the old outdoor tent circus in the minds of their audience, and to capitalize on the crowd's essential desire to escape into the realm of impossibility that is at the heart of circus performance. But, when it came down to the bottom line, they conveniently said that the core of circus was really the sideshow so as to sidestep tax obligations: while the substantial majority of the show was circus acts, actors in the stage company played archetypal characters including "Picturesque Pete, a Tattooed Man," "Jo-Jo, the dog faced boy," "The Shell Man," "Living Skeleton," and "Madam Gazaza, Circassian lady."²⁴ The Hippodrome team leaned into these characterizations and blamed light opera, anyway, saying that it as a genre "has educated us not to expect very much plot."²⁵

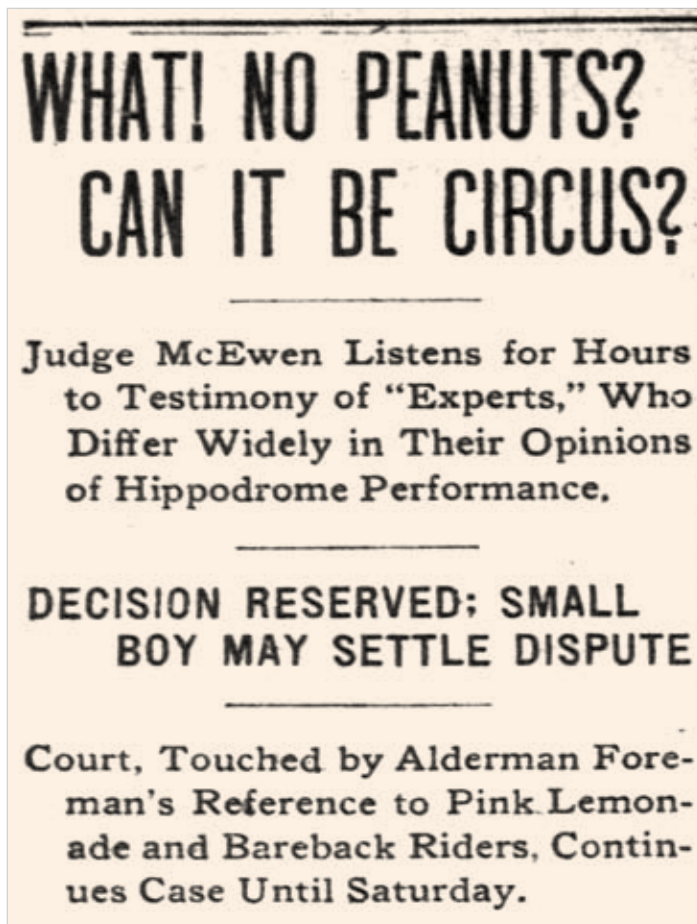
And while this no doubt seems on its face like a pointless question of linguistics and perhaps a waste of judicial resources, the *Yankee Circus* case is part of a long, strange, and legally significant line of cases in which judges get into the deep weeds about what makes the essence of a thing – not typically so much because the core definition of a word matters, but because they provide guidance on how meaning and intention interact, whether definitional or grammatical language can be persuasive or even partisan, and how we interpret the laws and regulations that govern everyday life in America – taxation, control of resources, basic commerce.

The words we choose matter, and to this end no less than the Supreme Court of the United States has heard cases about whether, legally speaking, tomatoes are fruit (no, because you eat them in salads and not for dessert),²⁶ whether beans

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Matinees Daily (Except Sunday) at 2 Every Night (Including Sunday) at 8		
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Thompson and Dundy's A Yankee Circus on Mars opened at the Chicago Auditorium on February 24, 1906.

The Inter Ocean (Chicago)



The controversy over the nature and amount of the license fee to be paid to the City of Chicago resulted from differing views on whether or not the show was a circus.

The Inter Ocean (Chicago)

are legumes or vegetables (the latter, because most people buy them to boil or put in soup rather than plant them),²⁷ or whether Long Island is, indeed, an island (if it is, the water around it is open ocean subject to federal regulation; the ruling held it is not, because the East River was naturally too shallow for ships' passage).²⁸

Nor was the Chicago case the last of its kind to implicate circus. An issue of *The Show World* from December 1908 notes that a similar case went to district court in Texas asking whether Buffalo Bill's Wild West show was a circus for tax purposes, and the judge also ruled that it was not – "the show had to be judged by the general performance exhibited," he held, "and not by a single isolated act."²⁹

As for *A Yankee Circus on Mars*, ultimately, Judge McEwen stated that the spirit of the Chicago ordinance did not apply itself to such performances. He ruled: "When you pour too much water into a glass of whisky, you have water. And when you pour into the glass a greater amount of whisky then you have whisky. And so it is with this 'Yankee Circus.' In my opinion the production is one-fourth circus and three-fourths burlesque."³⁰ The show would pay the smaller theatrical license. **BW**

Endnotes

1. "New York Hippodrome Will Be Demolished," *The Indianapolis Star*, July 1, 1939.
2. See, e.g., Amy Louise Wood, "Killing the Elephant: Murderous Beasts and the Thrill of Retribution, 1885-1930," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (July 2012); Michael Daly, *Topsy* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013).
3. Alice Sparberg Alexiou, *The Flatiron: the New York Landmark and the Incomparable City That Arose with It* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2010), p. 189.
4. Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan, *Bet a Million!: The Story of John W. Gates* (The Bobbs Merrill Company, 1948).
5. Backers had intended the Hippodrome to open March 16, a week ahead of the Barnum & Bailey show's annual debut at Madison Square Garden, but the crews ran afoul of blue laws that prohibited Sunday work and the opening happened in Apr. 1905. See Wendt & Kogan, p. 264.
6. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Apr. 24, 1906.
7. Regarding the plot, see Woody Register, *The Kid of Coney Island: Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements* (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 175-178.
8. See, e.g., "Hippodrome to Open," *New York Tribune*, Apr. 10, 1905.
9. *Ibid.* p. 175.
10. Lucy P. Gillman, "Coney Island," *New York History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (July, 1955).
11. This was true of the Yankee Circus' successor show, "A Society Circus," which featured a lake with live swans, a big-cat act and a "monkey ballet," leading *The New York Times* to headline that the "panorama of picturesque glitter" was viewed by a sellout house "who didn't mind losing the plot." See "A 'Society Circus' is Vastest of Spectacles," *The New York Times*, Dec. 14, 1905.
12. "The Hippodrome," *The Courier-News* (Bridgewater, New Jersey), June 3, 1905.
13. *Ibid.*
14. "At the Auditorium," *The Muscatine Journal* (Iowa), Mar. 3, 1906.
15. "Hippodrome Circus Sets Off for Chicago," *The New York Times*, Feb. 19, 1906.
16. "A 'Society Circus' is Vastest of Spectacles," *The New York Times*, Dec. 14, 1905.
17. "New York Triumph Renewed," *St. Albans Daily Messenger* (Vermont), May 3, 1906.
18. Advertisement in *The Inter-Ocean* (Chicago), Feb. 18, 1906.
19. "Hippodrome Passes All Known Limits," *The Inter-Ocean* (Chicago), Feb. 25, 1906.
20. "What! No Peanuts? Can It Be Circus?," *The Inter-Ocean* (Chicago), Mar. 23, 1906.
21. "Judiciary of Cook County," *Chicago Eagle*, Jan. 16, 1904.
22. "What! No Peanuts? Can It Be Circus?," op. cit. The reporter, tongue firmly in cheek, noted that the judge "may call in some small boy to shed light on the situation. He says he was once a small boy himself."
23. *Ibid.*
24. Program, week of Apr. 30, 1906, Boston Theatre, "A Yankee Circus on Mars."
25. "What! No Peanuts? Can It Be Circus?," op. cit.
26. *Nix v. Hedden*, 149 U.S. 304 (1893).
27. *Robertson v. Salomon*, 130 U.S. 412 (1889).
28. *United States v. Maine*, 469 U.S. 504 (1985).
29. "Show Not a Circus When a Wild West," *The Show World*, Vol. III, No.25, Dec. 12, 1908.
30. "Hippodrome Show No Circus," *The New York Times*, Mar. 25, 1906; "Show Not a Circus," *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, Mar. 25, 1906; "Yankee Circus on Mars Escapes License Fee; Not Full-Fledged," *The Inter-Ocean* (Chicago), Mar. 25, 1906.

There Used to Be a Circus Here

The New York Hippodrome

by Chris Berry



A glass and steel building is now located on the busy corner where The New York Hippodrome once stood.

Chris Berry photograph

Each day thousands of people in New York City pass the glass skyscraper at 1120 Sixth Avenue. To the casual pedestrian the building appears no different than dozens of others in the bustling Midtown Manhattan neighborhood. Chase Bank, AT&T and Fidelity Investments all have storefronts on the stretch of Sixth Avenue between West 43rd and 44th streets, and high above the pavement the 21-story building is home to the New York offices of fashion designer Perry

Ellis and Citizen watches, as well as studios of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Since 1952 the parcel of land has housed an office building and a 700-space parking garage, but from 1905 until 1939 that block of prime real estate was home to The New York Hippodrome, an enormous theatre where some of the greatest circus artists of the early 20th century appeared. The Hippodrome's place in New York's history is commemorated today by a large photograph of the original building that hangs in the sparkling lobby of its replacement.

The New York Hippodrome was the brainchild of Frederic Thompson and Elmer "Skip" Dundy, two young impresarios who had achieved tremendous success with Luna Park, a modern amusement park that opened on Brooklyn's Coney Island in May of 1903. Within weeks, the park became a destination for throngs of average New Yorkers who soaked up entertainment options that were spread across 22 acres of sideshows, rides, dance halls and canals.



The developers of the Hippodrome struck it rich with Luna Park, a 22-acre amusement park on Brooklyn's Coney Island. The theatre in Midtown Manhattan was designed to provide entertainment to masses during the cooler months.

New York Public Library

Luna Park was an immediate sensation and moneymaker. Only a year after the park opened, *The New York Times* reported that Thompson and Dundy had leased a city block in Manhattan that once housed a stable for horses that had pulled the city's street cars. According to the newspaper, Thompson and Dundy planned to build "a permanent circus" on the Sixth Avenue site. The building would be named The New York Hippodrome,¹ a tribute to the ancient arenas in Greece and Rome where chariot races were once held.²

From 1878 until 1939 an elevated railroad ran above Sixth Avenue, and in the early 20th century the clattering of the "el" trains had depressed property values along the street. Thompson and Dundy realized that if their new theatre was going to attract the same customers who frequented Luna Park, it had to be a showplace. The building permit for the Hippodrome described a \$400,000 palace that would take up the entire block. The Moorish exterior was a combination of red brick and terra cotta, and the roof included a line of flagpoles accentuated by towers on the corners of the building that were topped by large globes illuminated by electric lights.

By the spring of 1905, construction of the huge auditorium was complete. As opening night approached, a sculpture of an elephant head was placed high above the main entrance of the building and glass cases were installed to hold a menagerie of wild animals. The 5,300-seat theatre was the largest in the world, with a stage that was 200-feet long and 100-feet wide.³

About two weeks before the first performance, the animals that had been on display at Luna Park made a 12-hour trek from Coney Island to Midtown Manhattan. The thousands who lined the streets of Brooklyn saw a parade of seven elephants, a small group of camels, 132 dancing and high-diving horses, and a convoy of baggage wagons. When the animals finally arrived at their new home, they were bedded down in custom stalls that had been built under the theatre stage.⁴

Circus owner James A. Bailey was among the prominent celebrities who attended the Hippodrome's gala premiere on April 12, 1905. The four-hour program opened with a production titled *A Yankee Circus on Mars*, and closed with *Andersonville*, a Civil War drama in which Union and Confederate cavalries fought in a rushing river that had been created under a 30-foot bridge.

When the massive curtain rose for that first performance, the audience was transported to a New England circus lot that included a sideshow tent, a big top and hundreds of performers who filled the stage. As the story of the financially strapped circus unfolded, an auctioneer was preparing to sell the first of six elephants when an extra-terrestrial character appeared. The alien, under orders from the King of Mars, purchased the entire show, put it on the spaceship and blasted off for home.

The audience loved it.

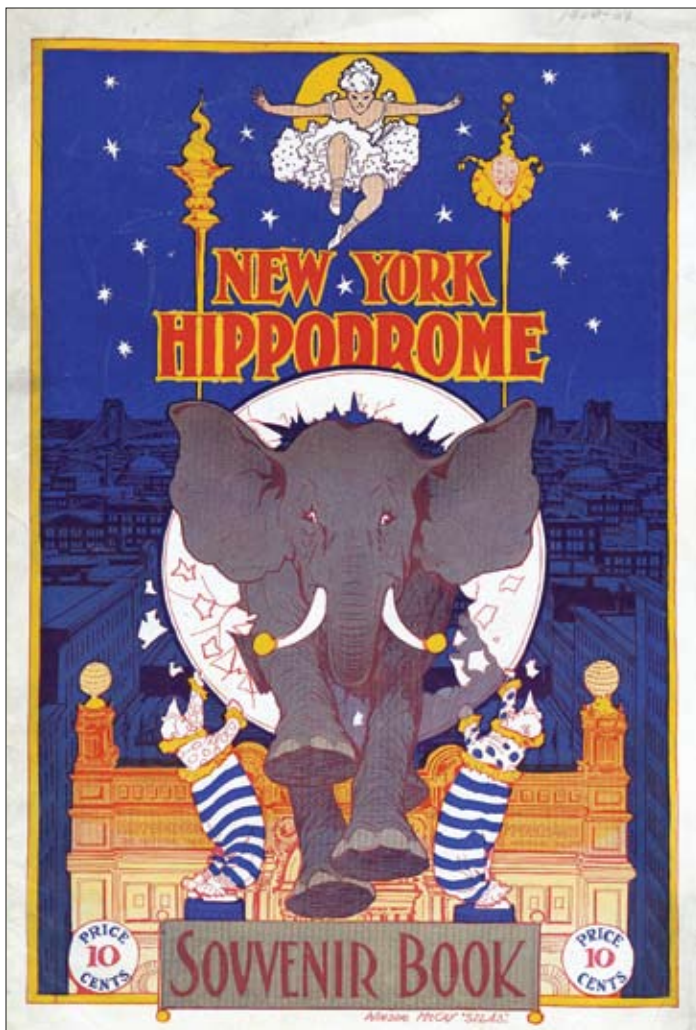


The Hippodrome took up an entire block on Manhattan's Sixth Avenue. The enormous building was originally conceived as "an indoor circus".
Museum of the City of New York

The first performance at the Hippodrome coincided with Barnum & Bailey's annual appearance at Madison Square Garden, and for the first time in memory, New Yorkers were able to choose between *The Greatest Show on Earth* and a new type of theatrical circus that featured horses, elephants, acrobats and clowns, along with a 60-piece orchestra, a spaceship and 500 actors dressed as Martians!

The Hippodrome circus featured dozens of animals, acrobats and thrill acts under the direction of Frank Melville who had previously served as equestrian director for the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Bros. Circus.⁵ During the performance, Melville presented an equestrian ballet which featured four dozen horses, 24 of them were snow white and the other 24 pitch black. The horses that were presented by Melville were kept under the stage, along with 100 others including the cavalry mounts used in the Civil War drama, and those used in the riding acts.

Among the equestrians appearing at the Hippodrome that first season were Oscar Lowande with his four horses, as well as the Clarkonian riding act with another eight. The show also included the Tybell sisters' iron jaw act, an assortment of acrobats and five elephants owned by Walter L. Main and presented by his former elephant superintendent



Many of the greatest circus acts of the early 20th century appeared in elaborate spectacles presented on the Hippodrome's huge stage.

The Ringling, Tibbals Circus Collection

William W. Power.⁶

The Billboard was lavish in its praise of the performance. "The audience was held spellbound. They never expected anything to compare with it...It is a feature of features, and a further review of it must be excused on the grounds that mere words will not convey an appreciation of its merit."⁷

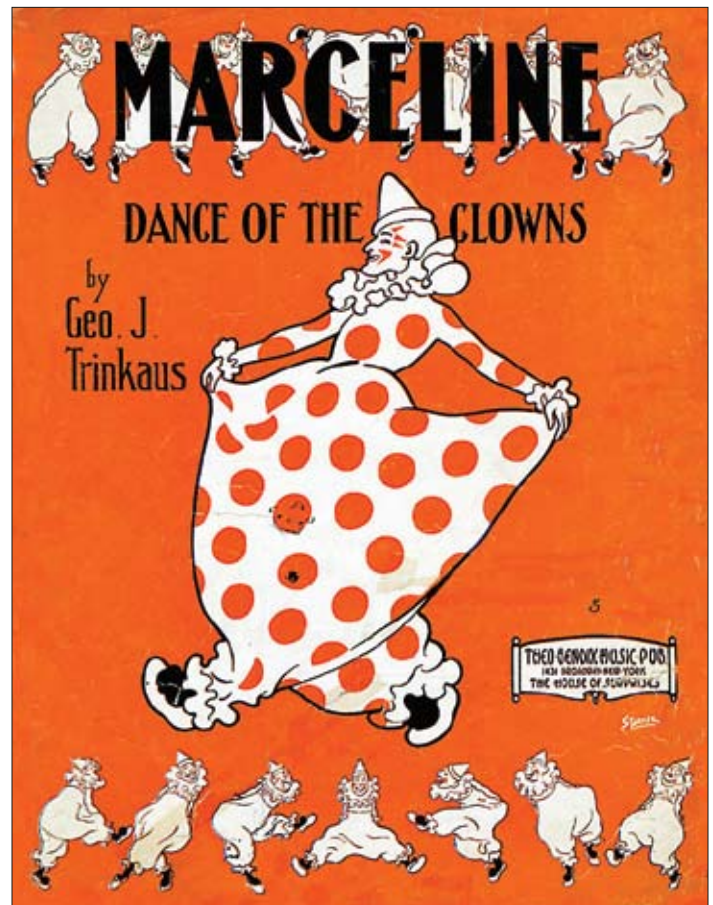
What the audience did not see was a backstage drama that was unfolding between the two clowns who appeared in the show.

Months before the Hippodrome was complete, *The Billboard* announced in a cover story that Frank "Slivers" Oakley, a headliner on both Forepaugh-Sells and Barnum & Bailey, had signed a 52-week contract as the theatre's principal clown.⁸ Only a few weeks later, however, Thompson and Dundy revealed they had also hired Marceline Orbes, a pantomime clown from Spain who had spent the previous five years performing at the London Hippodrome.

Slivers Oakley was irritated by the publicity given to Marceline prior to his arrival and when Marceline arrived in New York, Thompson and Dundy suggested that they have

dinner and become acquainted. At the end of the evening the two declared a truce. According to one account, "They were not hostile, they were not friendly. They tolerated each other as professional associates."⁹ The relationship worked, and they performed together for six years.

Although Marceline Orbes is an obscure figure today, he was an influential character at the time. One of those he inspired was actor Charlie Chaplin who – as a child – had performed with him in London. More than 60 years later, Chaplin was still able to describe the act in detail, dedicating significant space in his autobiography to his idol's comic genius.¹⁰



Although he is an obscure character today, Marceline inspired other great comedians such as Charlie Chaplin. He was imported from London for the Hippodrome's opening performance in 1905.

YorkSpace Institutional Repository

Years before Chaplin created "The Tramp," Marceline had developed a character who appeared in sloppy evening wear and a top hat. A typical routine unfolded during the first scene in *A Yankee Circus on Mars*. As the roustabouts set up the show, Marceline followed them around the stage. After they had pounded a tent stake into the "ground" and moved on, Marceline would pull the peg out, rush ahead of the sledge gang, and hand them the same stake they had just driven. Later in the show as a carpet was being unrolled for a pony act, Marceline would appear on the other side of

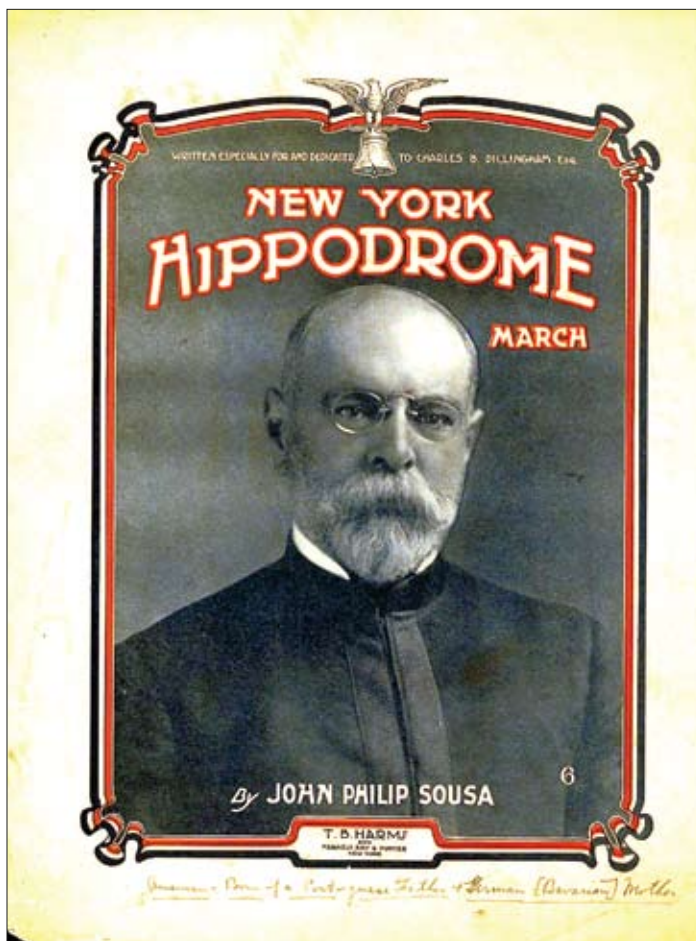
the ring and begin rolling it up, just before the ponies made their entrance.¹¹

Despite their artistic success, less than a year after it opened, Fred Thompson and Skip Dundy lost control of the Hippodrome. Even though there were steady crowds, box office revenues could not keep up with the cost of the performance and the expense of operating the massive building.¹²

With its founding partners no longer in charge, the Hippodrome's investors hired Lee and J. J. Shubert to manage the building. The two brothers had been successful operating theatres in Manhattan and upstate New York, and it was under their leadership that the Hippodrome established its reputation.

For years the Shuberts' large productions at the Hippodrome showcased a variety of circus acts, as evidenced by their first program which included Power's elephants, the Karoly bareback act, the iron-jaw artistry of the Curzon sisters and wire walking by The Four Holloways. The show also featured Thomas Webb's sea lions and Alexander Patty, billed as "the man who walks on his head."¹³

Not long after the Shuberts took over management of



Aerialist Tiny Kline was among the circus performers on hand when John Philip Sousa introduced a new march promoting *The New York Hippodrome*. The tune was commissioned to mark Sousa's 61st birthday.

New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Collection

the theatre, Marceline called the other Hippodrome clowns to the dressing room that had been designated as clown alley. The purpose of the meeting was to start a new professional organization, a brotherhood of clowns. According to press reports, Marceline said, "One of the principal features will be to collect and preserve the traditions of clowndom, and if possible, publish it." Marceline was a charter member as were the other Hippodrome clowns: James R. Adams, Frank Hansen, Clyde Powers and George Holland. They were joined by Spader Johnson and Fred DeVoe from Barnum & Bailey, as well as George Hartzell from Ringling Bros.¹⁴

The Hippodrome production in 1909 was billed as the "biggest show in its history." The featured performer was a 19-year-old wire-walker named Bird Millman, four years before she appeared in the center ring of Barnum & Bailey. The stage that season was decorated as a circus tent,¹⁵ and the performance included Alfred Loyal's dogs, the Schultes riding act, Harold Winston's seals and Manuel Herzog's stallions, as well as two of the circus world's premiere equestriennes, Rose Wentworth and Ouika Meers.¹⁶

The Hippodrome season traditionally kicked off in the fall, about the same time that outdoor circuses were returning to their winter quarters. As a result, quality acts that had spent the first half of the year touring under canvas had the opportunity to keep working throughout the winter without the travel required on the vaudeville circuit. Among the other circus acts on the Hippodrome bill during that period were Ella Bradna and Fred Derrick with their equestrian act, as well as Spellman's bears and Victoria Codona on the slack wire.¹⁷

Although individual acts could usually straddle the two seasons, each spring the competition between Barnum & Bailey and the Hippodrome would heat up when *The Greatest Show on Earth* opened at Madison Square Garden. The competition was always fierce during the months of March and April, and in 1910 *Variety* wrote that the Barnum & Bailey billposters were struggling as most of "the important stands were already plastered with Hippodrome paper."¹⁸

Advertising budgets for an established product are most effective when those products are perceived as "new and improved." In the years leading up to World War I, general manager Charles Dillingham began naming the Hippodrome productions to reinforce the changes in the program. One of the first was *The Big Show* in 1916. A feature of the performance that year was an elephant baseball game similar to the act that Harry Mooney had created for Barnum & Bailey three years earlier.

During *The Big Show*, Power's Elephants, dressed in baseball caps and uniforms, shuffled from base to base, took leads and, tried to steal as the ball was tossed from trunk to trunk. At one point the pitcher waddled to home plate "where he whispered plans into the catcher's flapping ear." After returning to the mound the elephant wound up and threw the ball. Despite the oversized bat the hitter whiffed



Power's Elephants were originally owned by Walter L. Main and the elephant Jennie was named after Jennie O'Brien, a former equestrian with the Ringling Bros. Circus. The small herd was later acquired by trainer William Power and his son George. When the Hippodrome changed hands, Power's Elephants toured the United States and Europe. This poster was printed for an appearance in the United Kingdom.

Tegge Circus Archives

the pitch.¹⁹

Two years later one of those elephants made history when she vanished on the Hippodrome stage.

The 1918 production was titled *Cheer Up*, and the headliner was the famed magician and escape artist Harry Houdini. During his act Jennie, a full-grown Asian elephant, made a spectacular entrance as she ran onstage and circled the great magician. The 6,000-pound elephant was nearly eight feet tall. When she finally stopped in the center of the stage, she stood on her back legs and saluted the audience by raising her trunk. Houdini rewarded her with a handful of sugar cubes and joked that her appetite for sweets was contributing to the sugar shortage caused by World War I.

After Jennie was led into a large circus wagon, Houdini signaled the orchestra to stop. "Watch closely, for it happens

in two seconds," he said. Houdini then clapped his hands, and his assistants opened all four sides of the wagon so that the audience could see to the back of the stage.

Jennie had disappeared!

After the elephant vanished, Houdini demonstrated his skill as an escape artist as he was nailed into a packing case and thrown into the Hippodrome's huge water tank. As the seconds passed, the audience feared the worst before Houdini freed himself and swam to the top of the pool.²⁰



Houdini and the elephant Jennie were the headliners for the 1918 production *Cheer Up*. The elephant that had originally been owned by Walter L. Main later trouped with the Polack Bros. and Mills Bros. circuses.

New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Collection

May Wirth and her family's riding act also appeared in *Cheer Up*, along with Lillian Leitzel's uncle Bluch Landolf, who had replaced Marceline as the Hippodrome's principal clown.

Cheer Up was one of the most expensive stage shows ever, costing \$30,000 a week to produce. To hold down base salaries, the principal artists participated in a profit-sharing plan. According to *The New York Times*, 51 cents of every dollar generated by ticket sales went back to the cast. Houdini reportedly received eight cents of every dollar brought in, May Wirth and her family were given ten cents from each dollar and Landolf received "a few cents". The Six Berlos each got a penny, and the 400 chorus girls each received portion of the box office.²¹

The Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 had an impact on all forms of entertainment and when Barnum & Bailey was forced to end its season early,²² one of the show's headlin-

ers, Poodles Hanneford, was hired to appear in the Hippodrome's holiday production titled *Everything*. It was the first time that Hanneford appeared on the Hippodrome stage, and according to *The Billboard* the comic equestrian quickly became "the talk of Broadway."²³

By early December, New York was coming out of the pandemic. During the Christmas and New Year's weeks there was a record attendance for the enormous playhouse. According to newspaper reviews of the performance, the act that resonated with the holiday crowds was the deceptively effortless horsemanship of Poodles Hanneford.²⁴

The success that Charles Dillingham had booking circus acts soon prompted discussions about whether the Hippodrome should create a railroad circus that would exhibit under canvas in cities and towns that presumably would be skipped when Barnum & Bailey and Ringling Bros. combined that spring.²⁵

The idea of a traveling Hippodrome show never jelled, however, when the new "Super Circus" opened at Madison Square Garden, Poodles Hanneford closed out his contract with Dillingham and returned to his place as a headliner on the Combined Shows.

When the Ringling-Barnum circus trains returned to winter quarters in Bridgeport in late November of 1919, Hanneford went back to the Hippodrome where he appeared as the central character in the new holiday production titled *Happy Days*, a family show written for children.²⁶

A year later Hanneford returned to star in *Good Times* which also featured the Nelson family's acrobatic act and Joe Jackson, the tramp bicycle rider. The show ran for 456 performances during the winter of 1920-21.

The following season the show was titled *Better Times*, and while Poodles Hanneford was not on the program, the production had a circus theme and audiences were promised "50 clowns and 50 acrobats" as well as Power's elephants, 60 horses and "100 diving Venuses". Although the show ran for 405 performances, when it closed the Hippodrome was swimming in red ink. At the end of the season Charles Dillingham left the organization and B. F. Keith leased the massive auditorium. The Keith-Albee vaudeville chain then remodeled the theatre so that it would have a much smaller stage, and many of the building's unique features were discarded.

Among the casualties were Power's elephants who left the Hippodrome and began touring the United States and Europe.

Even though the new theatre was smaller, circus acts were often attractions on the Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit. A typical vaudeville program at the Hippodrome in 1923 featured Alf Loyal's trained poodles and the Flying Wards trapeze act. Another circus performer who was booked into the Hippodrome in 1923 was wire walker Con Colleano. It was there that he first accomplished a forward somersault on the tight wire.²⁷

Bird Millman was another circus headliner who returned in the fall, and when Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey ended its 1924 season, Lillian Leitzel made her first appearance at the Hippodrome. According to *Variety*, "The aerial wonder from the Ringling outfit was in prime condition."²⁸

Leitzel was featured in a large production number titled "The Butterflies and Spider," appearing as the "spider" who performed about 25 feet in the air.²⁹ The "Queen of the Air" was just one of several superb circus acts on the bill that winter. Ella Bradna presented her dressage act and the show's announcer was Lew Graham, whose powerful voice was also heard on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. May and Phil Wirth were also on the program, and when their bareback act concluded, May closed the show by singing a popular song. According to one reviewer, the equestrienne's singing voice was "surprising to those not familiar with her versatility."³⁰

The show in 1925-26 included a young male elephant that the Hippodrome had acquired along with a few other animals from Mark Luescher, the owner of "Toy Town", an early theme park in Southport, Connecticut.³¹ The elephant was named Teddy, and after only one season at the Hippodrome, he was acquired by circus owner Andrew Downie. The tusker remained with the Downie Bros. herd for the next decade



Poodles Hanneford was a favorite of Hippodrome audiences. The notoriety he achieved performing at the famous building was promoted when he toured under canvas with the Sells-Floto Circus.

Chris Berry Collection



Although "Teddy" was only at the Hippodrome for one season, Downie Bros. created a special poster when he was acquired in 1926. The same artwork was later reworked by Erie Litho and Ptg. for the Russell Bros. Circus, though Teddy never appeared with that show.

Chris Berry Collection

before he was sold to Kay Bros. and later to the World of Mirth carnival.³²

The same show that featured Teddy, Leitzel and May Wirth also included a motion picture, a new attraction that started in 1925. Unfortunately, the addition of movies was still not enough to fill the theatre, and audiences were soon drawn to more elaborate movie palaces in the Times Square theatre district.

Although there had been several attempts to use the auditorium for plays and opera, the building essentially remained dark until 1935 when a young producer named Billy Rose leased the building for a spectacular Rogers and Hart circus musical titled *Jumbo*.

Because of the show's circus theme, Rose had the auditorium gutted and completely re-built to resemble the interior of a big top. The audience on the main floor was seated in a "grandstand" that sloped up from a circular revolving stage and the interior of theatre was painted red and white with sky blue trim. In addition, a large circus ring was added to serve as both a stage and arena. During the performance, the actors and animals entered through tunnels over what had been the original stage, and because wild animals were part of the show, a menagerie was built in the basement.³³

Billy Rose brought in a large cast for *Jumbo*, including Poodles Hanneford who had spent the summer of 1935 with the small Gorman Bros. Circus, owned by former Hippodrome general manager Tom Gorman. He also hired popular bandleader Paul Whiteman and his orchestra at a cost of \$6,000 a week and tried, unsuccessfully, to get Babe Ruth to

appear in the show.

The title character, Jumbo, was played by an elephant named Big Rosie, who had been on the Cole and Rogers Circus in 1934.³⁴

Billy Rose scored his biggest coup was when he hired comedian Jimmy Durante at a salary of \$3,000 a week. Durante was cast as circus press agent Claudius "Brainy" Bowers, and at the end of the show he had to lay on stage while the elephant walked over him. "Anyone who thinks I am overpaid should try that duet with the elephant nine times a week," Durante quipped.³⁵

On November 17, 1935, *Jumbo* opened to an audience that included some of Broadway's brightest stars. Among those in attendance were Rose's

wife Fannie Brice, Helen Hayes, Harpo Marx, Tallulah Bankhead, Sophie Tucker, Irving Berlin and Adolph Zucker.³⁶

The plot of the show was centered on two rival circus owners who had once been partners, and the feud they were having as their adult children were falling in love. When the financially troubled circus was sold in the first act, a dream sequence began that included clowns decked out in rhinestones and spangles as well as some of the circus world's top aerialists and equestriennes. When the first act ended, a 50-foot papier-mâché clown unfolded above the stage.

The second act was more circus oriented and featured a production number titled "Memories of Madison Square Garden". The various acts were presented in front of scenery that depicted the exterior of the original Garden at 26th Street and Madison Avenue.

There were 14 circus acts on the program including Poodles and Grace Hanneford, Herman Ostermaier and his horse Doheos, as well as gender-bending trapeze artist Vander Barquette. The show also featured The Kimris aerial act and A. Robins, a comic who was billed as "The Banana Man". During his act, Robins would produce an impossible number of props from his costume prior to performing various clown routines.

Jumbo also showcased aerialist Tiny Kline who performed her trademark iron-jaw "slide for life" from the top of the "sidewall" to the ring, however the sentimental favorite in the cast was 67-year-old Josie DeMott Robinson. Even at her advanced age she rode bareback and danced on a trotting horse, more than 60 years after she first started

performing.³⁷

One of those who saw Josie DeMott perform on opening night was actor Joe E. Brown, whose hit film *The Circus Clown* had been released only a few months before. Brown had started his show business career in 1900 as a ten-year-



Jimmy Durante was paid \$3,000 a week to appear in Billy Rose's Jumbo. At the end of the show the title character stepped over the comedian. Durante said that trick alone was worth his salary.

New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Collection

old tumbler with the Sells and Downs Circus,³⁸ and years later he wrote of his surprise when Josie DeMott performed the same act that he had first seen when they were both on the John Robinson Ten Big Shows 30 years before.

"I had a nostalgic twinge as Paul Whiteman's orchestra struck up some familiar circus tunes," he wrote, and when he realized that it was Josie DeMott dancing on the back of her horse, the memories flooded back. "It was the summer when I knew for the first time that I was in love...It was a hopeless case, though I did not realize it. She was 35 and I was 12...She was a little old lady now," he wrote, "but she sat on her mount, as poised as ever. She got a tremendous hand from the audience, and a real ovation from me."³⁹

The finale of *Jumbo* was a lavish scene titled "The Circus Wedding" which featured the marriage of the two circus owners' children on a trapeze as an elaborate spectacle unfolded below them.

The reviews were generally positive, with one review describing the show as "one-third circus, a third spectacle, and a third musical comedy."⁴⁰ Columnist Walter Winchell praised the show's visual flair and the 250 human and animal performers, but noted that the musical contained little in the way of a plot: "It is a thread of a tale this *Jumbo*, certainly not a speedy one, or attention-arresting saga – but every bit of it agreeable and it serves the plan."⁴¹

The box office on opening night generated \$17,000 and for months *Jumbo* ran at a profit.⁴² By the time the show closed after 233 performances, more than one million tickets had been sold,⁴³ yet when it was taken to Fort Worth for the Texas Centennial exposition in July 1936 it lost money. When *Jumbo* closed that fall, the props and scenery were returned to storage in New York. The production came back to life as a motion picture in 1962, albeit with a different plot, but again starring Jimmy Durante, along with Doris Day and Martha Raye.

As Billy Rose was preparing to take *Jumbo* to Fort Worth, he traveled from New York to Rochester, Indiana where he met privately with Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell, owners of the Cole Bros. Circus. Although the purpose of their meeting has never been disclosed, it is possible the discussions involved using the remodeled Hippodrome as an indoor venue for Cole Bros.⁴⁴

More than 85 years later, any role that Billy Rose might have played in bringing Adkins and Terrell's show to Manhattan remains a mystery, yet in December 1936 circus fans in New York City first learned that Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey would have a competitor when it arrived at Madison Square Garden that spring, the first time in de-



In 1935, equestrienne Josie DeMott Robinson performed bareback in Jumbo, more than 60 years after she first appeared in the circus ring.

The Ringling, Tibbals Circus Collection



Left, Jumbo's advertising embraced the musical's circus theme. The show's final scene was titled "Wedding of the Circus". Tegge Circus Archives

acades that rival circuses had appeared in the city.

When the announcement was made, *The New York Times* reached out to long-time Ringling press agent Dexter Fellows for his reaction. "There have never been two circuses in New York as far as I can recall, except for an occasional tent show which never amounted to anything," he said. "They say competition is the life of trade, and if we are going to have another circus, why all I have to say is, 'the more the merrier'."

The veteran spokesman went on, "...I'm not worried about any competition. We have always filled Madison Square Garden to the roof, and we will again." The *Times* pointed out that the Cole Bros. management and performers included many former Ringling employees, and that their passion was expected to create a circus war in New York.⁴⁵

Despite Dexter Fellows' public lack of concern, *Variety* reported that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was planning to spend \$30,000 to promote the New York engagement. Of that, \$20,000 would be spent on newspaper advertising.⁴⁶

Because of a scheduling conflict caused by a hockey tournament at Madison Square Garden, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey could not start its season until April 8. Consequently, Cole Bros arrived first, opening its 1937 tour on March 18 with 24 days of performances at the Hippodrome. The direct "day and date" competition didn't occur until early April, and then only for four days.

It had been less than three years since Jess Adkins, Zack Terrell and Clyde Beatty had left the Ringling organization, so it is reasonable to assume that their upstart circus hoped to send a message by invading what had previously been considered exclusive territory. With that in mind, Adkins and Terrell took unprecedented steps to make their first New York appearance memorable. Among the attractions that were being added was a revival of the famous Hippodrome ballet which consisted of dozens of dancing girls.

The New York press corps was intrigued by the "circus war", and although the Cole title was unfamiliar to New Yorkers, Clyde Beatty had performed with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey at Madison Square Garden in the early 1930s and his films, *The Big Cage* and *The Lost Jungle* had both been screened at movie houses throughout the city.

The Billboard also reported on the rivalry, pointing out the significant news coverage that Cole Bros. was receiving as well as the thorough job being done by the circus billposters. Photographs appeared in the trade journal that showed a display at the Hermitage Hotel in the heart of the Times Square theatre district where approximately 700 sheets of paper covered all but three of the hotel's 17 floors. In addition, the Park Central Hotel at 56th Street and Broadway presented a display of muslin banners that were 50 sheets high and six sheets across. General Agent Floyd King reported that he was pleased with the advance sale and preparations for the New York premiere.⁴⁷

There were over 5,000 seats in the Hippodrome and the highest price ticket sold for \$2.50. Although it was less than the cost of Ringling-Barnum at Madison Square Garden, King said the prices were appropriate since the show and location were not familiar to most New Yorkers.⁴⁸

On the morning of March 15, the Cole Bros. train pulled into the Baltimore and Ohio freight yards at 11th Avenue and 25th Street, only one day



Billy Rose created a circus tent setting for his 1935 spectacle Jumbo. The musical comedy featured a menagerie of animals and dozens of circus performers.

New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Collection

after a crippling snowstorm. Since the circus did not require any of the trappings it needed under canvas, once animals were unloaded from the train, the big cats and other smaller animals were loaded onto trucks and taken to the arena. Meanwhile an impromptu parade of nine elephants, nearly 100 horses, ponies and mules, as well as other prop wagons made its way north on 11th Avenue to 44th Street where it turned east for a crosstown trip to the Hippodrome.⁴⁹

The Cole Bros. production that opened three days later was titled "Circus Continental", and it used the same one ring staging that had been created for *Jumbo*. As a result, the three rings of elephants that normally appeared under canvas was reduced to a single group of eight, presented by Jean Allen, wife of elephant superintendent Eddie Allen.⁵⁰

Throughout the engagement, the newspapers fawned over both Clyde Beatty and his wife Harriet, and the day before the show opened, the animal trainer told a reporter that while he had no qualms about being in a cage of wild animals, the thing that scared him most was Manhattan traf-

fic. "I wouldn't drive a car in New York for any amount of money," said the man who regularly faced death armed with only a kitchen chair, a whip and a pistol loaded with blank cartridges.⁵¹

Among those who attended the Cole Bros. premiere were New York Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia and New Jersey Governor Harold Hoffman along with their families. When the show ended, Hoffman, a horse enthusiast, spoke with Jorgen Christensen and congratulated him on his sensational 24-horse liberty act.⁵²

The opening performance ran until nearly midnight, and according to one observer, although Clyde Beatty closed the show with an impressive display that featured 38 big cats, it took 20 minutes to set up the arena, about the same time that it took him to perform the entire act.

Only two days into the run, owner Jess Adkins rearranged the program to cut the show to three hours. Although surviving souvenir programs reflect the original order, several displays, including Harold Barnes tight-wire



The New York newspapers declared a "circus war" when Cole Bros. challenged Ringling in 1937. It was the first time that two circuses had been in Manhattan at the same time and the competition was fierce.

Chris Berry Collection

performance and Jorgen Christiansen's Great Dane act, were dropped completely. In addition, Beatty's act, which had originally closed the show, was moved to the second spot after intermission with the flying return act as the finale.⁵³

In 1937, Emmett Kelly and Otto Greibling were at the top of their game, and their unique routines were frequently mentioned in newspaper columns. *The Billboard* speculated on their appeal by suggesting that they were popular "...because their work is original and devoid of any copy."⁵⁴

Another attraction that garnered more than its share of newspaper ink was the 40 elaborately costumed showgirls choreographed by Allan Foster. The numbers featuring the showgirls were interspersed between the traditional circus acts, and that did not set well with some traditionalists.

One reviewer for *The Billboard* said that despite the powerful lineup of acts and the traditional circus band that was led by Victor Robbins, the introduction of the showgirls had turned the circus into a soft-core burlesque show. "...scanty costumes and filmy tresses seem out of place in the sawdust ring, the Hippodrome date of the Cole show is not supposed to be a circus in the real sense of the word, but it is being billed and advertised as a circus. Chronic pessimists might term it the beginning of the end for American circuses."⁵⁵

The outcry from readers was apparently enough to force the critic to explain himself the following week, writ-

ing "We enjoyed the Cole Bros.-Clyde Beatty Show," adding, "Christiansen's Liberty horse number, the clowns and most of the other acts are unusually entertaining." Nevertheless, he doubled down on his earlier review, stating, "Everyone in a circus program is supposed to be an artist, expertly trained and finely developed... so we were disagreeably surprised when the bevy of New York showgirls had nothing more to do than the typical vaudeville stage or larger night club floor shows."⁵⁶

In the same issue of *The Billboard*, a different critic also weighed in on the showgirl controversy, writing, "...perhaps all of us are wrong. At least we must give the circus owners credit for trying to introduce something new!"⁵⁷

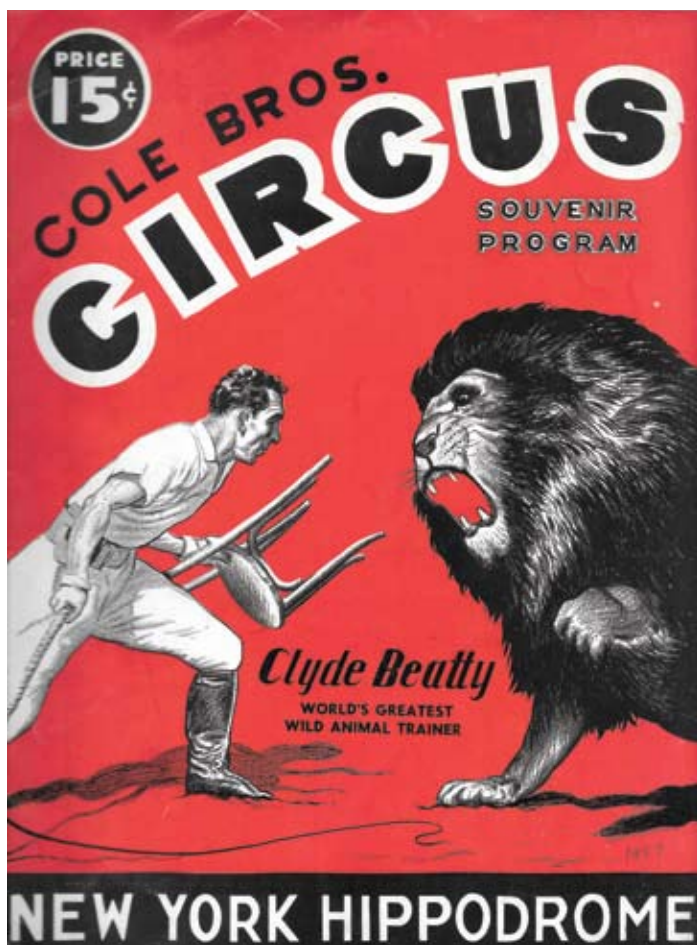
Allan Foster's showgirls were pictured along with the traditional circus performers in a series of photographs taken by Edward Kelty while the show was at the Hippodrome. Although Kelty had a long history of photographing circuses and circus acts, those who were with Cole Bros. in the spring of 1937 were amazed by the speed at which he worked, reporting that the photos were taken at noon, the proofs were available by 4:00 P.M., and Kelty was

back with the prints the next day.⁵⁸

Two weeks into Cole Bros. New York engagement, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's 40-car train left Sarasota with the performers, personnel and equipment required for its opening at Madison Square Garden. On the same day that Ringling left winter quarters, Cole Bros. reported that even though the circus had not set any house records during its first ten days, business was "encouraging". On the Monday after Easter, the circus added a 10:30 matinee each morning with tickets for the special performance as low at 50-cents for seats in the upper balcony to \$1.50 in the orchestra.

On April 7, as the New York appearance was winding down, an inspector from the Humane Society accused Clyde Beatty of mistreating his animals. Beatty was arrested and booked on charges of animal cruelty. His \$500 bail was paid by the Hippodrome.⁵⁹

Two days later Beatty appeared in court and Jacob Jacobs of the Humane Society testified that he had observed marks that might have been welts on the back of the animals, though he acknowledged that he was not certain whether the marks were on the flesh or the fur of the cats. Jacobs also told the court he had seen Beatty wielding a long whip while he was in the cage with the animals, and that a helper had prodded the animals with a pole.



A special souvenir program was created for the Cole Bros. Hippodrome appearance. On opening night, the show ran more than three hours and some of the acts had to be eliminated.

Bob Amon Collection

Beatty's attorney then asked the judge whether his client could respond to the charges, but before he could speak the court rejected the motion and dismissed the case. At lunch that afternoon Beatty told a group of reporters and editors that he would have liked to give his side of the story, explaining that any marks that the big cats might have may have actually been caused by fights that they had among themselves. He then added that he would welcome Mr. Jacobs into the cage at any time to demonstrate the proper way to handle lions and tigers.⁶⁰

Just hours after Beatty was exonerated, a huge crowd filled the Hippodrome, while less than a mile away it was standing room only at Madison Square Garden. Although the two shows only overlapped for four days, at least one observer suggested that the buzz about the circus rivalry may have stimulated business. The conventional wisdom was that the thousands of lithographs and extensive newspaper advertising had made the New York public more circus-minded than in the past.⁶¹

Years later Emmett Kelly reflected on the Cole Bros. appearance at the Hippodrome. "The show was wonderfully well received by the New York press and radio writers," he recalled, "but the larger Ringling show a few blocks away in its traditional Madison Square Garden appearance did all of

the business."⁶²

When the Hippodrome engagement ended on April 11, Cole Bros. left Manhattan, never to return. From New York the show moved to the Chicago Stadium where it again faced opposition, this time from Hagenbeck-Wallace which was set up across town at the Chicago Coliseum. Despite the economic woes of the 1930s, the nation was experiencing a recovery. Business was good and as Cole Bros. began a cross-country tour that took it to California, Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell began planning for a second unit.

Although the 1937 season started off well, a recession that began that summer created an economic downturn that would force both Cole Bros. and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey to close early in 1938. The Hippodrome did not fare any better, and while it sputtered along with boxing and wrestling matches as well as jai alai games and late-night movies, it was not enough to keep the massive building afloat.

The New York Hippodrome closed on August 16, 1939, and was demolished that fall, its huge basement and water tank filled in for future development. World War II delayed those plans and the block remained vacant for over a decade.

Unlike other New York theatres, the Hippodrome had been designed for the masses, the same crowd that was attracted to Coney Island each summer. For thousands of New Yorkers, especially children, it had been their first exposure to entertainment on the stage, and for many of them, those early memories were of the circus performers who appeared in the massive building.

The second act of *Jumbo* was titled "Memories of Madison Square Garden" and for thousands of those who had been in the audience, the scene that Billy Rose created on the Hippodrome stage rekindled the nostalgia of long-ago performances and performers. There will never be another circus on Sixth Avenue between 43rd and 44th streets, but if your travels ever take you to that busy intersection, stop and pause. You may just hear the faint music of Paul Whiteman and Victor Robbins, along with the whispers of Poodles Hanneford, Slivers Oakley and Josie DeMott. **BW**

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Bob Amon, Heidi Connor, Jennifer Lemmer Posey and Timothy Tegge for their assistance.

Endnotes

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The scene that Edward Kelty captured from the Hippodrome stage shows the same single ring that had been used for Jumbo. Although familiar figures such as equestrian director Harry McFarlane, Emmett Kelly and Otto Griebling are visible, the photograph also includes dozens of showgirls brought in specifically for the engagement. For some unknown reason, Clyde Beatty does not appear in this cast photo.

Tegge Circus Archives

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A large photograph of the original building hangs in the sparkling lobby of 1120 Sixth Avenue in New York.

Edison Properties, New York

Enriching a Family Legacy

Lou Ann and Dolly Jacobs – From Sarasota to Stardom

by Julie K. Parkinson

Imagine going back in time, almost one hundred years and observing Lillian Leitzel as she tutored school children in her private dressing room tent, one student being a young Dolly Jahn. Outside on the lot, passed a new, young clown on the show, 12 years younger than Leitzel, who would later date Dolly. It wasn't Dolly Jahn that Lou Jacobs would marry, but some 30 years later he and his wife would name their second daughter after her. Decades later, that daughter, Dolly Jacobs, also a renowned aerialist, would accept an award on Lillian

Leitzel's behalf, and as she did, she spoke about that fateful day in Copenhagen. Moments in time, sometimes intertwined.

Much has been recorded on the life of Lou Jacobs as well as his two daughters: Lou Ann and Dolly. Both were accomplished aerialists, but each has created a different legacy of their own with their husbands. One of them developing an outstanding elephant act and later championing elephant conservation, and the other creating and founding Circus Sarasota and the Circus Arts Conservatory. Behind their publicized and celebrated lives is the largely untold story of their family and upbringing.



Jeannie Corry Rockwell, a Long Island native and print model, graced the cover of Pageant magazine in 1948. When this issue hit the newsstands, Jeannie had already been performing on The Greatest Show on Earth for several months, and it was about the time of her fall at Madison Square Garden.



While growing up in Sarasota, the girls only saw their dad a few times each year, including during winter quarters months and when they could visit the show with their mom when it played nearby cities in Florida. Though the early years of their lives were not regularly spent with their dad, both parents were major influences on their daughters. photos from Dolly Jacobs Collection



Sisters Lou Ann and Dolly posed in their showgirl costumes as seasoned performers on The Greatest Show on Earth, October 8, 1972. photo by Robert E. Handley

In 1952, Jean Corry Rockwell had already achieved status as one of the top professional models in the United States. Her unique curly hair made her a sought-after subject. She became “Miss Prell”, and also did modeling for Breck shampoo, Faberge cologne, and others. Her daughters later said she was “like a butterfly” as she gracefully floated between modeling, acting in commercials and soap operas, and other endeavors. It was one day while taking ballet lessons at Carnegie Hall that she was intrigued by a notice on the wall calling for showgirl try-outs for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Jeannie moved from Long Island and joined the show at winter quarters in Sarasota at the end of 1947. Soon after, she was performing in the air. After about six months into her new career, the show arrived in New York. Jeannie was part of an aerial ballet spectacle which included several different types of aerial acts, where she and her female partner performed a revolving ladder act. It was counterweighted with the ladder beginning vertically hung, and once the aerialists climbed to the ends of the ladder, it rotated to a horizontal

position. During a show in the old Madison Square Garden, Jean was climbing to the top when her partner abruptly got off because the ladder was wrapped around a rope – the disruption in counterweight caused Jean to fall about 40 feet. They carried her on a board across the street to Polyclinic and discovered that she had crushed three vertebrae. Instead of surgery, they put her in a body cast, which she wore for two years.

There in New York City, Jeannie Rockwell’s reputation preceded her, and while she recovered in the hospital, literally scores of news publications wanted to cover the famous print model and her recovery. *The Daily News* (Daily News, New York’s Picture Newspaper, May 6, 1948, page 1) reported the day after the accident:

“Nearly 15,000 men women and children were horrified at 3:30 yesterday afternoon, when 22-year-old Jeannie Rockwell, a member of the Monte Carlo aerial ballet of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, pitched from a spinning ladder and plunged



Daily News - June 6, 1948 - exactly one month after the accident. Jean’s face was a familiar one in New York City and many journalists wanted to cover the story of the recovery of the young model-turned-aerialist. Here she shares the front page with the future Queen-to-be, Princess Elizabeth.

Dolly Jacobs Collection

25 feet to the floor in Madison Square Garden.”

The article went on to say:

“Becoming a member of the biggest circus in the world was not the first time the versatile Jeannie Rockwell had bid for fame. She is a former Conover model, a licensed airplane pilot, an expert horse woman, and a better-than-fair photographer. She also draws and writes poetry.”

Exactly one month later, the front page of the *Sunday News* in New York, featured a photo of her on the right side of the newspaper (Sunday News, New York's Picture Newspaper, June 6, 1948, p. 1). In the photo she is in a body cast, laying in a hospital bed, while grabbing onto a trapeze bar above her head, as if she was determined to keep her upper body strength while she recovered. The story was titled “Circus Performer on the Mend”. Next to her on the left side of the front page was a photo, about the same size, of a young future Queen – “Princess Elizabeth a Mamma-to-Be” it read. For years after, Jean would joke that she “upstaged the Queen” as it was thought that the right side of the front page of a newspaper was reserved for the most prominent story.

Jean was a huge fan of legendary clown Lou Jacobs, who visited her in the hospital. Later, when she was able to go back to the show to continue her recovery, she had time to pursue her hobby of photography. During that time, Lou Jacobs became one of her favorite photographic subjects, and there began a romance between the young New York model and the world-famous clown who was 20 years her senior.

Johann Ludwig Jacob and Jean Corry Rockwell married on June 12, 1953 at the courthouse in Jersey City, New Jersey. The best man was one of the “midgets” on the show and friend of the groom, Harold Simmons. Lou Jacob added an “s” to end of his last name when using it professionally, as he thought it flowed better and was easier to say. Years later, both of his daughters followed suit, but only professionally.

In 1954, several Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey star performers were lured away from the big show by Polack Bros. Circus. The newlywed couple were among those who joined Polack, and while Lou was in Sacramento and Jean was two weeks overdue, daughter Lou Ann was born. It was both a happy and sad time for Jean because while she was giving birth to her first child, her father passed away and she was not able to go to his funeral.

Newspaper photographers captured Lou Jacobs coming down the hallway of Mercy General Catholic Hospital, to check on his wife and newborn daughter. Nuns peered through a window to see the clown in full costume and make-up while he visited between shows.

Two and a half years later, the small family became four when daughter Dolly Jean was born while Ringling was wintering in Sarasota.

Lou bought a little trailer for his family to live in for the first couple of years and later bought a house on Iola Drive,



Lou Ann, named after her father, was born June 5, 1954 in Sacramento while Lou performed on Polack Bros. Circus. He visited his newborn daughter in Mercy Hospital between shows.

Lou Ann Jacob Barreda Collection

in Sarasota. At the time, there were lots of little kids on the show. Lou Ann and Dolly ran around, hanging on ropes and anything they could get their hands on. In those days, it was frowned upon to have kids traveling on the show if they were not performing, but old enough to attend school. When Lou Ann was of school age, Jean and the girls perma-



Jean, Lou and baby Lou Ann, 1955.

Lou Ann Jacob Barreda Collection

nently moved into the home in Sarasota.

Since Lou was only able to come home to Sarasota a couple of times each year, Jean would take the girls to visit the show whenever it was close – Venice, St. Petersburg, West Palm Beach, Miami. During one of those visits, Dolly was backstage and was walking across the back door entrance

during the show. In that particular building, there were two doors, an entrance into the arena and an exit, with the band situated in between. Dolly crossed in front of the entrance and was not thinking as she began to cross the second portal just as the elephants came tearing back through the exit. She was stuck, pressed against the wall, as the fierce wind blew by her. One of Hugo Schmitt's men saw her, and she was quickly reprimanded.

On another trip to visit their dad on *The Greatest Show on Earth*, Lou gave Lou Ann money to buy cotton candy. She skipped through the backstage area, excited to buy her treat. The chimpanzees were waiting to go on and were sitting backstage on a little wagon. As Lou Ann ran by, only thinking about her cotton candy, one of the chimps grabbed her dress. Luckily the trainer caught the chimp before anything worse could happen. The trainer yelled, "Who are you? Who's your parents?" Lou Ann told them who her parents were. She was so embarrassed to have caused an incident, but at that age she had not known any better.

Jean made a "home full of love" that Lou could return to whenever the show was laying off. The girls grew up on simple means, with little money, but they were kept extremely busy with exciting activities that occupied their days. During the school year they attended gymnastics classes, taught by Willie Edelston, at Sailor Circus. In the summers, their mom drove them around from sunup to sundown beginning with 7:00 A.M. swim lessons in the Gulf of Mexico, including diving and taking lifesaving courses with their mom. The sisters later taught swim lessons to younger kids in the Gulf. They were chauffeured by their mother to lessons at the Jane Speer ballet company, gymnastics, and competitive swimming. Jean also often took the girls to see inspirational movies.

At home, the girls had somewhat of a menagerie to take care of – over the years they had a donkey, a duck, a macaw, love birds, three guinea pigs, a dachshund, several mutts and a Palomino horse (on loan from long-time Ringling veterinarian, J. Y. "Doc" Henderson). But perhaps the most significant part of their animal family was Corkey, a yellow-headed Amazon parrot. The several-year-old bird became part of the household when Dolly was an infant. Dolly cared for him until he died in 2021 at the age of 72.

In the 1960s at Sailor Circus, each class would learn a different aerial discipline. Dolly began doing a "side by side" double trapeze just off the floor when she was eleven years old. When Lou Ann started, she trained on a metal star with an act similar to a web routine. Senior year students were taught the Spanish web. Both sisters were also trained in tumbling. For Lou Ann and Dolly both, it was nothing but fun.

While Jean regularly put her daughters in situations that helped develop character and put the "thrill of competition" inside of them, Lou led by example both in the ring and outside of it. He taught that no matter what the girls chose



Over the years, the girls took care of everything from guinea pigs to horses. Here Dolly stands in the backyard of their house with their duck, Quack Quack. Perhaps the most beloved member of their animal family was Corkey, a yellow-headed Amazon parrot that they got when he was already several years old and Dolly was an infant. Normal lifespan for these birds is about 55 to 60 years. Dolly had him until he died in 2021 at the age of 72.

Dolly Jacobs Collection

in life, to always strive to be the best at it. But beyond the support and love he showed his family, his humbleness and gentleness were evident to all. Though their childhood years were not regularly spent with their dad, both parents were huge influences on their daughters' lives.

When their dad was off the road, the girls made many memories with him. Once, Lou built a boat that pulled skis behind it which he later rode in a gag on the show. He wanted to practice it, and he took Lou Ann to the Church of the Palms and had her drive the boat around while he practiced his skiing skills in the parking lot.

Around the time of completing the first semester of her sophomore year, Lou Ann accompanied her dad down to winter quarters in Venice, and she met aerial director, Antoinette Concello, who had heard about the 15-year-old's aerial skills. Lou Ann overheard Antoinette say to her dad, "Put her in a leotard Lou, and bring her down." Later that day, Lou took his daughter to lunch at a little diner and Lou Ann begged her dad, "Oh, Pappa please! I would just love to go on the show with you!" He replied, "No. No way. It's not possible. You have to go to school. You have to get a good education." Lou Ann later found out that the younger kids in the King Charles Troupe were schooled by a private tutor.

Lou Ann told her dad, “They have a private tutor, he’ll give me private lessons, too.” And within a short time after meeting Concello, Lou Ann had talked her dad into letting her join the show.

The aerial number came easily to the 15-year-old, and often during rehearsals Antoinette Concello would pick Lou Ann to demonstrate to the other girls how the routine should be done. Lou Ann counted along to the music, determined to do everything perfectly. Learning the dance steps was something new to her, but with her background in ballet, she picked it up easily. At the end of the year (1969), Antoinette came to Lou and said, “You got any more of them at home?”

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey celebrated its 100th anniversary edition in 1970. This was the unit of the circus that Lou Ann joined when she was still a teenager, venturing out on the road with her dad. It was an adjustment for both of them. They shared a very small state room on the Ringling train, with Lou Ann occupying the top bunk and her dad down below. Lou Ann would wash her hairpieces in the little sink in the corner and hang them off her top bunk to dry. In the morning, Lou would sit up and say, “Oh, these scalps!” He also called them other words. He wasn’t used to a young girl living with him. Although Lou was very strict



While on a trip to visit her dad on the road, Dolly observed as Lou and Knucklehead practiced a trick backstage.

Dolly Jacobs Collection

with his daughter, it was wonderful for Lou Ann to be with her dad full-time.

Lou Ann quickly became accustomed to the ways of the circus world and got used to taking the circus bus from the train to the building, which cost 25 cents. A couple of the veteran female performers took Lou Ann under their wing. They put her in a chair and plucked her eyebrows, applied make-up and eyelashes – since Lou Ann didn’t know how to do those things on her own. Lou Ann made friends with Kathy Bessetti, another show girl who liked adventure and was several years older than Lou Ann. During a train-run, they stopped for a “water stop” and Kathy convinced Lou Ann to go with her down the street to a 7-Eleven. While in the store, the next thing they knew, “Pappa” came in with the head train master, who was still in his pajamas! They were holding the train for the girls, and Lou was not happy.

Lou Ann also became close with the striking Dawnita Bale, Elvin’s twin sister. As one of Lou Ann’s first worldly friends, Dawnita taught Lou Ann how to drink her tea with milk, as they did in England. Once, Lou Ann relayed a story to her friend about when she made her debut on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey many years before in 1960. Lou Ann was about six years old and visiting her dad on the show. One of the kid performers was out sick and Lou Ann was asked to fill in for her. Lou Ann wore a curly wig, a long dress, and rode a nursery rhyme float during the “Fairyland Fantasy” spec. She stood facing a giant cracked mirror and on the other side was a grown woman. They each brushed their hair while they stood facing each other through the mirror. When Lou Ann told Dawnita the story, her friend



Lou Ann Jacob made her performing debut on Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey riding one of the nursery rhyme floats in the spec, taking the place of an ill child performer. Jean had taken the girls to visit Lou on the show and happenstance created the opportunity.

Lou Ann Jacob Barreda Collection

exclaimed, “that was me on the other side of the mirror and it was my sister, Bonnie, who was out sick!”

As a showgirl, Lou Ann danced, performed web, perch and participated in the spectacles. The first year that Lou Ann performed, she was part of a unique aerial display. She entered in a flower cart, dressed as a flower like the other showgirls. Above the center ring, the Hildalys performed their up-side-down act. Lou Ann was one of 16 girls positioned around each of the other two rings. While on perches hung from a moving rectangular track, they performed a synchronized routine that mimicked the Hildalys (by the time the show reached New York, Elvin Bale was the new center-ring feature of the aerial display with his daring trapeze heel catches).

Back home in Sarasota, after completing her first year on Ringling, Lou Ann was outside their



Dolly was overjoyed one Christmas morning to receive her very own guinea pig. Here she posed with her family and held her furry friend which she named Cha Cha, c.1967.

Dominique Jando, Circopedia.org



In this publicity shot, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's famous clown, Lou Jacobs, welcomes his daughter Lou Ann to the 101st edition of The Greatest Show on Earth. At just 15, Lou Ann left Sarasota to join her dad on the road after finishing the first half of her sophomore year.

Courtesy Feld Entertainment

house, teaching the dance steps to her young sister, Dolly. Lou Ann had ulterior motives to bring her sister onto the show and to get the four-some of their family back together, on the road. Her plan succeeded. Dolly was only 13 years old during rehearsals, and when the train left Venice, the family was permanently living together for the first time in many years (the family had transferred to the Red Unit at that time).

Dolly began to dread rehearsals because of the tough aerial director, Richard Barstow. He was constantly picking on the girls, and he gave each girl a nickname. Dolly was a shy young teen and extremely mortified each time that he called her out. She was supposed to be following an imaginary elephant which she had apparently walked into (she guessed because she didn't see it). Barstow put the mic in her face and said, “Tell everyone what you did wrong.” He would say, “OK, let's do it allll again thanks to [so and so].” Finally, one of the Bulgarians



Following in their mother's footsteps, more than in their father's, both sisters joined Ringling and began their professional performing careers as showgirls. Later, they each developed individual solo aerial acts. Here Lou posed with his daughters, Dolly (left) and Lou Ann in 1973.

Dolly Jacobs Collection

punched him in the nose.

Barstow called out Lou Ann only once during a spec rehearsal. She was supposed to be Little Miss Muffet eating her curds and whey while sitting in the center ring. Lou Jacobs would then come up behind her with a big fake spider, and she was supposed to jump, scream and run. Barstow got on her case because she wasn't doing it elaborately enough, saying, "Isn't your father a clown? Can't you do this?"

During Lou Ann's second year on the show, the aerial display was a Spanish web. Most of the showgirls performed around the track, although four ladies were chosen to perform a more advanced routine of contortion on the web, inside the rings. Lou Ann and the other girls were picked because of their advance skill as well as their flexibility. Lou Ann worked very hard at perfecting the routine and often came down out of breath, although she was having the time of her life.

After she became a seasoned performer, Lou Ann was chosen to be the first rider out in the elephant act, after Gunther Gebel-Williams. Gunther entered the arena while standing on the back an elephant with the herd trailing behind. Lou Ann rode Ranni, the elephant directly behind Gunther. The girls were taught to ride sitting back on the elephant's shoulder blades with their legs straight, and their arms "styling" out to the side while the elephant was in a full run. Lou Ann remembers, "It was so fun!" as her elephant tore down the backtrack and to her tub at the end of the arena.

With the skills she had attained at Sailor Circus, Dolly took to the web easily and she had support from her sister who helped her with the choreography of the dance routines. Dolly dreaded rehearsals, but once on the road she thought it was "awesome." When Dolly joined, they didn't have a place for her in finale, so she got to walk with the acts. She made herself a



From an early age, the girls had a love of animals instilled in them that would carry through to their adult lives. In this family photo, Lou Ann carries Buffy and Jean holds Knucklehead, two of the dogs that loyally performed with Lou for many years. Previously, Lou Ann and Dolly helped deliver eight puppies that Knucklehead had given birth to, one being Buffy.

Dolly Jacobs Collection



There were many advantages of being on the road, including being together as a family, as well as being able to visit extended family scattered all over the country. Jacobs Christmas card, 1974.

Dolly Jacobs Collection

ing on the show, he was still living in a tiny state room with bunk beds. Dolly now had the top bunk in the room that she shared with her sister. They had a little refrigerator and “crumb boxes” at the foot of each bed. For Lou Ann, neither the small room nor anything else bothered her: “I was just in awe of everything. I just loved the eyelashes and the glamour of the costumes and

costume out of a yellow leotard and adorned it with orange feathers. Dolly was one of the youngest performers on the 1971 tour, and she was one of a group of underage kids who were required to have a “health checkup” while in New York. Dolly helped “translate” for those young performers who did not speak English. Although she didn’t actually speak their language, she translated with the universal language that exists within the circus world. Dolly was tutored in three subjects by female clown, Kathy Herb. She would arrive at 9:00 A.M. and they would study for three hours or so, depending on what time the first show was. Dolly finished high school on the road and when she graduated, some the clowns presented her with a graduation certificate that they had created and threw a party for her.

Dolly was paired up with the elephant, Tetchi, who was notorious for trying to pull the girls off of her. She would reach up behind her ear with her trunk and try to grab the rider’s foot to pull them down. She had little ears which did not help the situation. Once, when Dolly was still young and inexperienced, the elephants were lined up behind the back door with their riders, waiting to run out. Gunther walked by Tetchi with Dolly on top and right as he passed, she grabbed Dolly’s foot and all the sudden Dolly was hanging off the side, holding onto the elephant’s halter. Neither Gunther nor anyone else had seen it happen. It was only moments before the whole herd would charge out into the arena, and Dolly had a vision of all the elephants behind trampling her. Her adrenaline kicked in, allowing her somehow to pull herself back upon the top of the elephant, just as they ran out.

The family of four inhabited two state rooms on the train, right next door to each other. Lou Jacobs had been on Ringling-Barnum since 1925 and as the humble man he was, he never asked for anything and so, after 50 years of be-

all the different characters in the show.”

The girls idolized Rogana, regal and elegant in her ways, and they watched her balancing act regularly from afar. Lou Ann also loved to watch Mary Gill, a flyer who resembled a “teacup.” She remembers the day that she fell. Guy wires snapped which caused the platform to jolt and sent Mary falling behind the apron of the flying trapeze. Lou Ann had watched her fall and survive, but not without injury.

Lou Jacobs sometimes told his daughters stories of his life on Ringling in his earlier years. One such story was about the day of the Hartford fire – a day when he actually was not on the show. Lou had gone to New York for a dentist appointment and stayed with his brother while he was there. The morning after the fire, he heard about it on the radio and left immediately to go back to the show. Not fully knowing the extent of the tragedy that had occurred, he was most worried about his trunks and props – his whole livelihood. Luckily, someone had grabbed them, and they were safe.

Lou also told the girls about when he stayed with the Wallendas and built his world-famous little car, which he would test out on the main roads in Sarasota. One day when he was driving it, the brakes wouldn’t work, so he had to keep going around and around until finally it stopped. Sometimes he would take his little clown car to the gas station to fill it up, which turned heads, even in “Circus City.”

At the end of 1971, after two solid years on the road, Lou Ann had decided to go back to school for the second semester of her senior year. She wanted to go to prom and graduate with the classmates that she had grown up with. Being back in school also meant that she would once again perform in Sailor Circus, and she practiced web with the other seniors. She also began training with her godmother, Margie Geiger, and together they developed a trapeze act.



On January 1, 1973, Ringling publicized the 70th birthday of famed clown, Lou Jacobs. Here he is front and center, holding his cake with his family kneeling around him, while clowns and showgirls look on from behind. In front, left to right: Dolly, Jean, Lou, Lou Ann and in the foreground is Knucklehead, eyeing the cake.

Courtesy Feld Entertainment

She began the act with handstands and contortion up on the small platform and then gracefully flipped herself over and down to the trapeze. The act was a combination of strength, skill and contortion that included ankle catches, heel hangs and back balances collapsing into a contorted backbend, all while wearing tights and no shoes. They had the rigging specially built and asked Keith Green to write music for the act.

Later, after her new act was established, Lou Ann had an opportunity to audition her dynamic trapeze act for Irvin and Kenneth Feld, in Venice during rehearsals. She was excited about a chance to be back on Ringling, trav-

However, after graduating in May of 1972, Lou Ann and her mother rejoined Dolly and their dad on the road, and Lou Ann was once again a showgirl on *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

After a couple of years back on the show, Lou Ann decided she wanted to see the world and perform the trapeze act that she had developed while at Sailor Circus. She performed on George Matthew's Great London Circus for over two years and toured a year in Canada with the Ronald McDonald Circus.

At that point in time, Lou Ann decided that she needed to take her trapeze act to the next level, and she went back to Sarasota to train with Margie on some more difficult tricks. Margie designed a unique apparatus which allowed lighted rigging to turn during the act. The trapeze hung from a very high rigging, with a 22-inch-wide platform above it that was perched 30 feet in the air.



On a trapeze practice day in her backyard, Lou Ann posed with her trainer and godmother Margie Geiger, father Lou and sister Dolly. Margie joined Ringling in 1947 as a ballet girl. The next year she married Joe Geiger who was performing in the seven-person pyramid with the Wallendas. Later he helped Margie develop her Roman rings act, which she performed on Ringling in the early 1950s. Margie and Joe became close friends of the Jacobs and godparents for both of their daughters. Dolly would subsequently train with Margie to develop her own Roman rings act.

Dolly Jacobs Collection



Lou Jacobs posed with his daughter, Dolly on the back lot of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, c.1978. When Dolly joined the show seven years before, she was 13 years old and one of the youngest performers on the show.

Courtesy Feld Entertainment

eling with her family once again. After the audition, Lou Ann went up to the office to meet with management. They told her they did not want the turning apparatus, only the trapeze, and they wanted to figure out a way for Lou Ann and Dolly to work together, all of which Lou Ann agreed to. She asked about compensation, and they told her they were going to give her \$10 less than Dolly (who by then was performing her solo act), so it would not cause a fight between the girls (this was not something that the sisters did). When Lou Ann found out what the bottom line was, it wasn't enough for her, and she faced a decision. Lou Ann left and went to her dad to discuss the situation, "Pappa, I really want to be back with the family, but I feel like I'm being forced to make a decision that I'm not comfortable with." She had really wanted to perform with the rigging that she had worked so hard to develop. Lou looked at her and said, "If you can get a better offer somewhere else, then go for it."

Soon after, Lou Ann was driving from Venice to Sarasota, and she passed Tommy and Struppi Hanneford's house. Even though she had never met them, she decided to stop in and speak with them. The Royal Hanneford Circus was about to go out on the road. Lou Ann explained to them which tricks she was performing on the trapeze, including three consecutive tricks that the legendary trapezist Albert Powell had done decades before. At the time, Lou Ann did not know that Struppi had been a world-class trapeze artist. Tommy looked at Lou Ann and said, "Well if you're as good as you say you are..." Then he offered her more than Ringling had offered.



Lou Ann demonstrated contortion and strength as she performed her world-class trapeze act. Before devoting her life to the circus, Lou Ann was heading in the direction of pursuing swimming as a career. At just twelve years old she won first place at regionals, and later she was hired to teach children with disabilities how to swim.

Lou Ann Jacob Barreda Collection



Lou Ann was photographed during a flawless heel hang, a difficult feat in itself made even more challenging when wearing two pairs of tights, as she always did while performing her act.

Lou Ann Jacob Barreda Collection

Lou Ann went on the road with Royal Hanneford. The first time that she performed for them, Struppi called Lou Ann “poetry in motion” and Tommy gave her a higher salary – on her first day! They showed her that they wanted to keep her around – and she did, working for them for several years, and later working many of the big Shrine dates. Meanwhile, her sister Dolly was performing on *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

After performing for five years as a showgirl, Dolly knew that she wanted to develop an act which would give her solo status. She started practicing on the low wire because she wanted to do something unique and not just follow in the footsteps of an aerialist before her. Lou Ann had already developed her first-rate trapeze act, and at one time she

suggested to her sister that she should do the Roman rings so that they could work together. Dolly could not decide what to do, but she knew the low wire was not for her, in part because she believed she would need to do somersaults on the wire in order to achieve a stellar act. Finally, she decided that the trapeze could be a starting point. Dolly was adamant about making her own path, and she didn’t think the rings were going to be right for her. But then her godmother, Margie Geiger, convincingly said to Dolly, “Just give the rings a try.” Margie herself had performed the rings and done one-armed planges for her final trick. Dolly immediately fell in love with the swinging rings, and there was no one performing the act at the time which meant there was no one for her to compete with.

At the end of 1975 when Dolly was 18 years old, she left the road for a few months to develop her act with Margie in Sarasota, just as her sister had done. When the act was ready, they flew to Washington DC with an appointment to audition her Roman rings act for the Felds. If they liked her new act, it would be added to the performance. The Felds were delayed in their arrival, so the audition was postponed. Unfortunately, Margie had to return to Florida, and Dolly’s mentor was not able to be present for the audition. A large group of performers and employees came to support Dolly, many who had become like family to her over the previous



At first, Dolly did not want to perform on the Roman rings, but her mentor and godmother, Marjorie Geiger, convinced her to try them, and Dolly instantly fell in love with the swinging rings.
Dolly Jacobs Collection

five years. When she finally auditioned, she was privileged to be swung by her dear dad. Dolly worked in Ring 3 that night with her new act, while three other aerialists performed simultaneously in the arena.

Dolly knew she would need to develop a unique trick in order for her act to be outstanding. She heard from her godparents, Margie and Joe Geiger, that someone had once done a somersault from the Roman rings to a web. Dolly thought this could be the trick that could catapult her act into a class by itself – but she could not find anyone who was willing to help her learn the trick. Then Wally Naughten, an animal trainer on Ringling, told her, “You can do it, Dolly.” The support that he gave her, “lit the fire” within her.

Anyone who had ever performed a somersault from the Roman rings to a web was no longer around, and Dolly had to learn by trial and error. On occasion, Dolly had flown with the Flying Farfans, and the experience of catching and releasing helped her a bit when practicing the daring feat. During her several weeks of practice, she got whiplash multiple times which created severe issues in her neck. Finally, she achieved her goal and then was able to ask for a higher salary and work her way up the ladder of success. Dolly performed her Roman rings act for nine years on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and 24 years in all.

Meanwhile, as Lou Ann had been touring the United States, she became aware that the time she spent on Ringling had felt like she was living in a bubble. She shared these feelings with many who have performed on *The Greatest Show on Earth*, “When you’re on Ringling, you don’t know about any other shows...I didn’t realize that there was a whole world out there, and there were circuses everywhere.”

For Dolly, one of the biggest challenges of being on the road was getting the mail. Back then, everyone paid their bills by mail, bills that had been forwarded to the show from Vienna, Virginia. There was always a big manila envelope hanging backstage for the outgoing mail. One day the envelope and its contents disappeared after being consumed by an elephant! Lou had instilled in his daughters to always

save your money, always pay your bills on time, and to be honest and correct about everything. Dolly said, "He would sweat bullets at tax time, making sure everything was accurate." It was difficult when they would not get their mail on time, which would make them late in paying their bills.

After 14 years on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Dolly was eager to get out and see the world for herself. She had loved the exciting time she had shared, primarily with her dad, on the show. She had not taken for granted the advantages of being on Ringling – like having the luxury of her rigging installed for her, having her costumes washed and mended for each performance, and living on the train which transported her all over the country. The main reason Dolly had stayed the last couple of years was to help her dad, but by that point in time, Lou Jacobs was not on the road as much. The first years had been fun and exciting, being one of the showgirls, but later the show had become a grind for her. When Dolly finally made the decision to leave, a weight was taken off her shoulders.

Both sisters were now accomplished aerialists, each making a great living with the acts that they had developed and achieved. And out into the world they took with them the attributes that their parents had instilled in them.



Father and daughter photographed during the Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo in 1977. It was the first time Dolly performed at the Festival.

Dolly Jacobs Collection



John Ringling North presented his longstanding friend Lou Jacobs with the Prix Special du Jury during the awards ceremony at the Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo in 1977. Loomis Dean photograph, Dolly Jacobs Collection

In 1977, Dolly first competed at the Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo performing her Roman rings act. During the festival, Lou Jacobs was there to escort his daughter into and out of the ring. At the time, her finish trick was a one-knee spin highlighted with a cascade of mirror ball reflections, and towards the end of her decent, her dad would help stop her from spinning. During one of the performances, Dolly came out of the spin, and while hanging from one knee she tried to grab his hand and accidentally knocked his nose off! He graciously hid it from the audience, and then quickly put it on again.

During that visit to Monaco, Dolly recalled one night when she and her dad went to a dinner:

"We walked in, and John Ringling North was seated across the table. He and my dad were old buddies for many years. Pappa reached over to shake his hand, and despite all the people and commotion around, when they shook hands, it was as if time stood still. Together they had experienced so many seasons and together they were the true essence of the circus."

Later that week, at the awards ceremony at the festival, John Ringling North presented Lou Jacobs with the Prix Special du Jury for his lifetime achievements.

The following year, Lou Ann performed on behalf of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey at the Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo, even though she had never performed her act on the show before. She was asked to do a television special with Telly Savalas. Dolly had done a similar special with Brenda Vaccaro and John Davidson inside the Monte Carlo Casino the year before. Although being on camera was admittedly not Lou Ann's forte, she agreed because Dolly's experience had been easy, and she



Dolly Jacobs won a Silver Clown at the 1988 Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo with her Roman rings act in which her final trick was a somersault from the rings to a web.

Dolly Jacobs Collection

had told Lou Ann all she did was say, “Oui, Oui Monsieur.” However, Lou Ann’s experience was quite different. She was filmed at multiple locations and was expected to recite multiple lines in French while on camera. It began with her at the airport, and Telly offered her a ride to the hotel. She was not confident with her acting skills and explained to Telly that her acting was like him trying to do the trapeze. Telly helped her and after freezing mid-sentence a few times and forgetting her lines, it all turned out well.

Dolly returned to Monte Carlo in 1988 with the summersault to the web final trick, this time without her dad’s assistance, as Lou was advancing in years. She was awarded a coveted Silver Clown for her performance. She also won the Dame du Cirque award for the second time, after first winning it when she appeared at the festival in 1977.

When Lou was around 85 years old, he stopped performing, but he still occasionally worked during Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College and often spoke at special events. Dolly said:

“I sometimes go to the Clown College reunions now and I can feel the love all around for my dad. It’s just amazing how you can impact a person’s life just by being a good influence. Pappa was very generous with his time as well as telling his secrets of



Lou Jacobs posed with his daughters, Dolly (left) and Lou Ann while the show played in Champaign, Illinois in 1972.

photo by Robert E. Handley

clowning. He was very humble and wanted to teach others everything he could.”

Future generations of clowns revered him, but to the girls he was simply their dad who gave them advice, support and unconditional love. Lou Ann was privileged to have her dad walk her down the aisle at her wedding to Jorge Barreda in 1988. Dolly, once again heeding her father’s advice – “Make sure you get to know him” – waited 17 years to tie the knot with Pedro Reis.

Today, Dolly feels that the impression her dad left on her has carried over to her current role as Founder & Vice President of the Circus Arts Conservatory:

“I see these kids accomplishing a trick and it sparks the memory of going through the struggle myself. But it’s not only about accomplishing the trick, it’s learning that it takes hard work to get somewhere and gaining a sense of pride that cannot be taught. It’s priceless to witness a student finally accomplish that trick – to see them so proud of themselves. I know exactly how they feel. It’s something that money can’t buy; it’s earned.”

The girls were always willing to display their family loyalty. In one instance, it was suggested that Lou Jacobs could

be replaced by another clown. Lou Ann was not afraid to stand up and say, "Oh no you can't!" and was quick to defend her dad. After being on the road with Ringling for roughly 50 years, Lou Jacobs still lived in a tiny state room with two bunk beds, but his humbleness did not allow him to fight for the things he deserved. It was due to his daughter Dolly's diligence that he was finally given a bigger room and in essence the respect that she thought her dad deserved.

Lou Jacobs didn't just leave a legacy of being one of the most famous of all American clowns, he also (along with his multi-talented wife Jean) left an even more meaningful legacy to his family. The only clown to ever have his image appear on a United States postal stamp, the stamp, or impression, he forever made on his family's hearts has carried through to his grandchildren, and undoubtedly will make a mark on generations to come.

Acknowledgments

This article was based in large measure on a recorded audio interview with Lou Ann Jacob Barreda and Dolly Jacobs Reis at the Sarasota home of Dolly and Pedro Reis, conducted by the author on August 23, 2022, as well as multiple subsequent telephone and in-person visits. Gratitude is extended to Lou Ann and Dolly for graciously providing detailed recollections of their early years growing up within the family of Jean and Lou Jacobs and launching their individual circus careers. **BW**



Lou Jacobs strides down the hippodrome track followed by his trusted dog Knucklehead, dressed in an elephant costume, performing on Ringling-Barnum in 1972.

Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

Moments in Time

In my youth, I had the fortunate opportunity to perform at Circus World Museum in its big top performances and magic shows. At the time, the Barredas were performing in the circus with their elephant act. When I was 13 years old, Lou Ann Jacob Barreda became my mentor, first training me on the Spanish web. For my birthday, she surprised me with a trapeze that had been made especially for me, and she began to teach me the basic fundamentals of the act that she had once superbly performed. During the months that she instructed me, Lou Ann told me stories of being on Ringling with her dad, and painted a picture of it being a magical, wonderful place. This, I learned for myself, when a few years later I joined the Blue Unit.

One day at practice, Lou Ann arrived and told me that she and her husband Jorge were going to have a little girl, and they had decided to name her Julia. On another oc-

casion, her elderly father was visiting her in Baraboo and Lou Ann brought him with her to our training session. Lou Ann borrowed one of the padded ringside seats and brought it into the ring. There Lou Jacobs sat and watched us practice – a special moment in time for me.

Many years later, I had the privilege of working for Dolly Jacobs and Pedro Reis in Sarasota for a short period and witnessed the spirit that their entire staff had as they worked towards the goals of developing and enhancing the multitude of projects under the Circus Arts Conservatory.

These two women, Lou Ann and Dolly, have influenced and inspired me – and are some of the best examples of class, achievement and elegance in the circus world yesterday and today.

Jean Reis

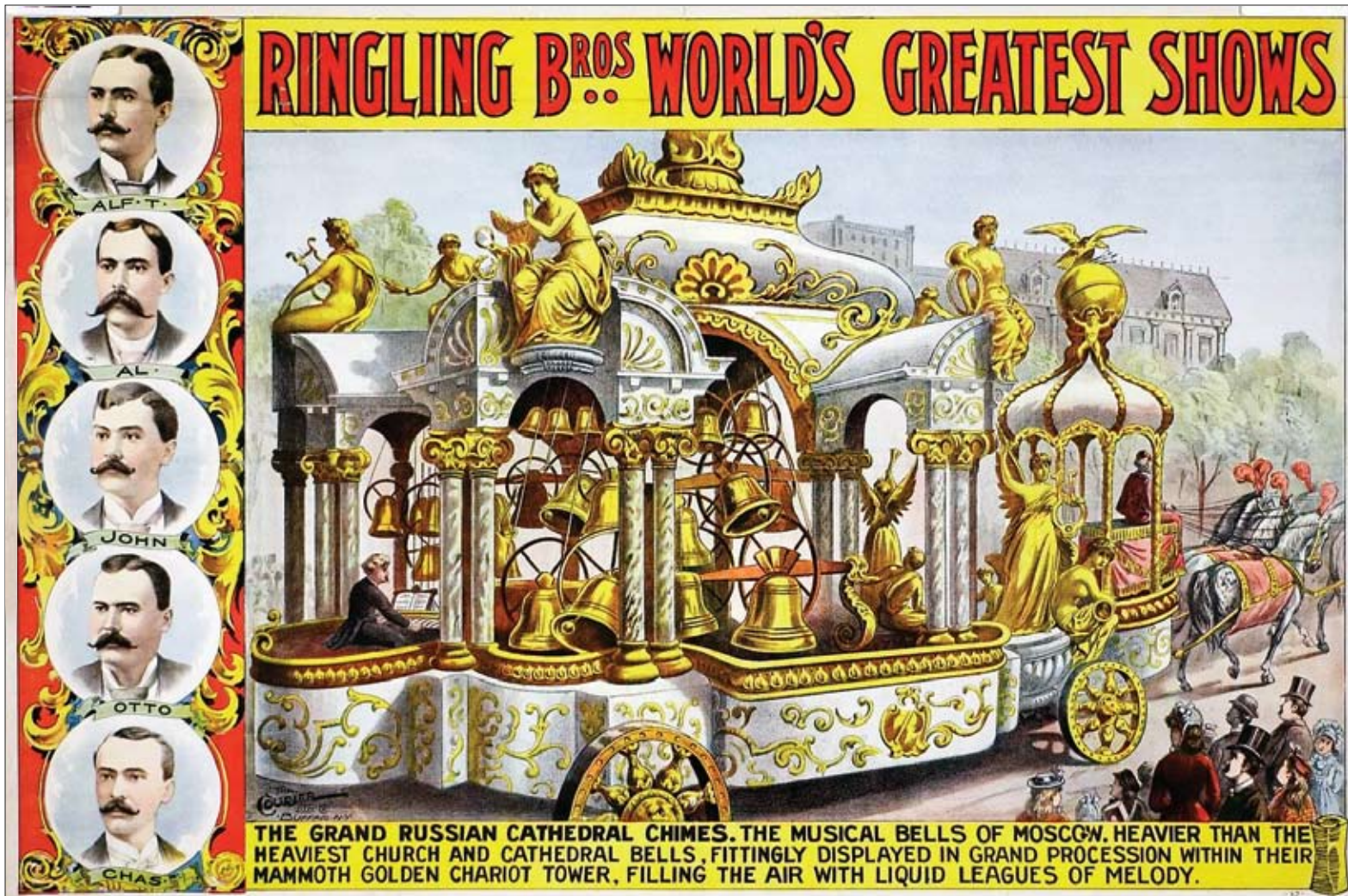
An 1892 Ringling Bros. Courier Poster Set

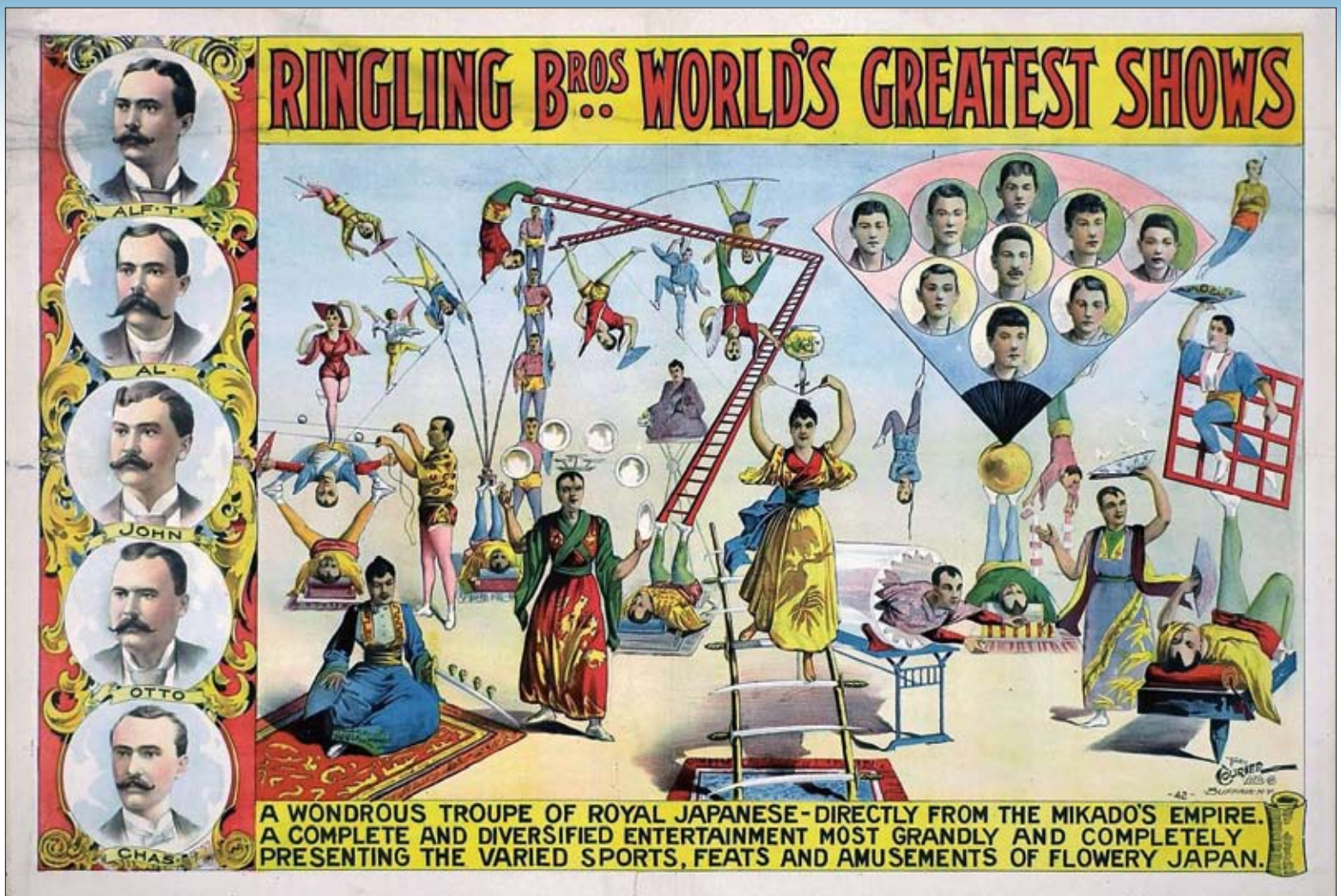
by Greg Parkinson

Six Ringling Bros. posters preserved at the Horace Howard Furness Memorial Library at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia are rare and historic examples from a distinctive set of one sheets designed in 1892 by the Courier Litho. Company of Buffalo, New York. Each has identical title lettering placed on a yellow banner above the pictorial, and each includes the same vertically-stacked portraits of

the five founding brothers at the left. These treasures – along with many other 19th century circus lithographs – were once the property of a Philadelphia theatrical organization called the Charlotte Cushman Club which was disbanded in 1999 but reestablished the next year as the Charlotte Cushman Foundation.

The Bell Wagon poster was previously known of by vir-





tue of a decades-old black & white photo of the lithograph. However, no original print of it or any of these posters are known to have survived in other collections aside from a wild animal montage parade lithograph, a print of which is at the Robert L. Parkinson Library at Circus World Museum along with another one from this 1892 set depicting a Roman-riding race scene.¹ Each of the other five at Furman Library may be sole surviving copies. Some similarly designed posters can be found in other collections, although the five portraits on those bills are staggered rather than aligned.

After traveling overland as a wagon show for seven seasons, Ringling Bros. converted to rail operations in 1890. By 1892, the circus had become a fairly large enterprise moving on 28 railroad cars and boasting four advance cars. The show's performance tent was a 180-foot round top with four 50-foot middle sections, making its footprint 180 feet wide and 290 feet long.²

The American circus was celebrating its 100th year as Ringling began its 1892 season offering several spectacular new features. One of these, "The Grand Russian Cathedral Chimes, the Musical Bells of Moscow," was built during the winter of 1891-1892. Those who are familiar with the Bell

Wagon's 1890s appearance will note that the imaginative artists at Courier created a rendering far different than the parade unit we have seen in old photographs. A different 1892 lithograph from the Courier staggered-portraits group portrays the Bells of Moscow and other parade units being pulled by a J. I. Case "locomotive" that was given the name "Hercules." However, no evidence has been uncovered to confirm that this steam tractor was ever actually used to tow the Bell Wagon.

Providing additional evidence that this set of posters dates from 1892 is the lithograph for the Mikado Troupe of Royal Japanese artists from the city of Yeddo.³ Several of these nine performers were replaced by other Japanese acrobats and jugglers in 1893, and that year the group was identified as the Akimota Troupe.⁴

By the time Charles Fish joined Ringling for the 1892 season, he was an acclaimed veteran rider having performed with Spalding & Rogers when he was a teenager, P. T. Barnum's Circus in the 1870s, as well as Burr Robbins and others in the 1880s. He appeared before Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle in 1886 and was a leading equestrian star while with Ringling Bros. for three years before his death in May 1895.

RINGLING BROS. WORLD'S GREATEST SHOWS



MR. CHAS. W. FISH, CHAMPION BAREBACK SOMERSAULT RIDER OF THE WORLD. THE UNDISPUTED KING OF ALL EQUESTRIANS

RINGLING BROS. WORLD'S GREATEST SHOWS



THE ONLY COMPLETE & PERFECT EXPOSITION OF NATURAL HISTORY ON THIS CONTINENT.

Perhaps his greatest achievement on horseback was a succession of three backward somersaults over hand-held cloth banners.

The two Courier wild animal posters appear at first glance to be very similar montages. One shows an array of beasts to be seen in the "Natural History" menagerie collection. The other advertised the animals in the "wide-open dens" of the free street parade. A total of 25 such cage wagons were exhibited in the 1892 Ringling menagerie that measured 80 feet by 280 feet.⁵

The last example of the posters within this set fancies enough domestic animals to outfit an average size farm

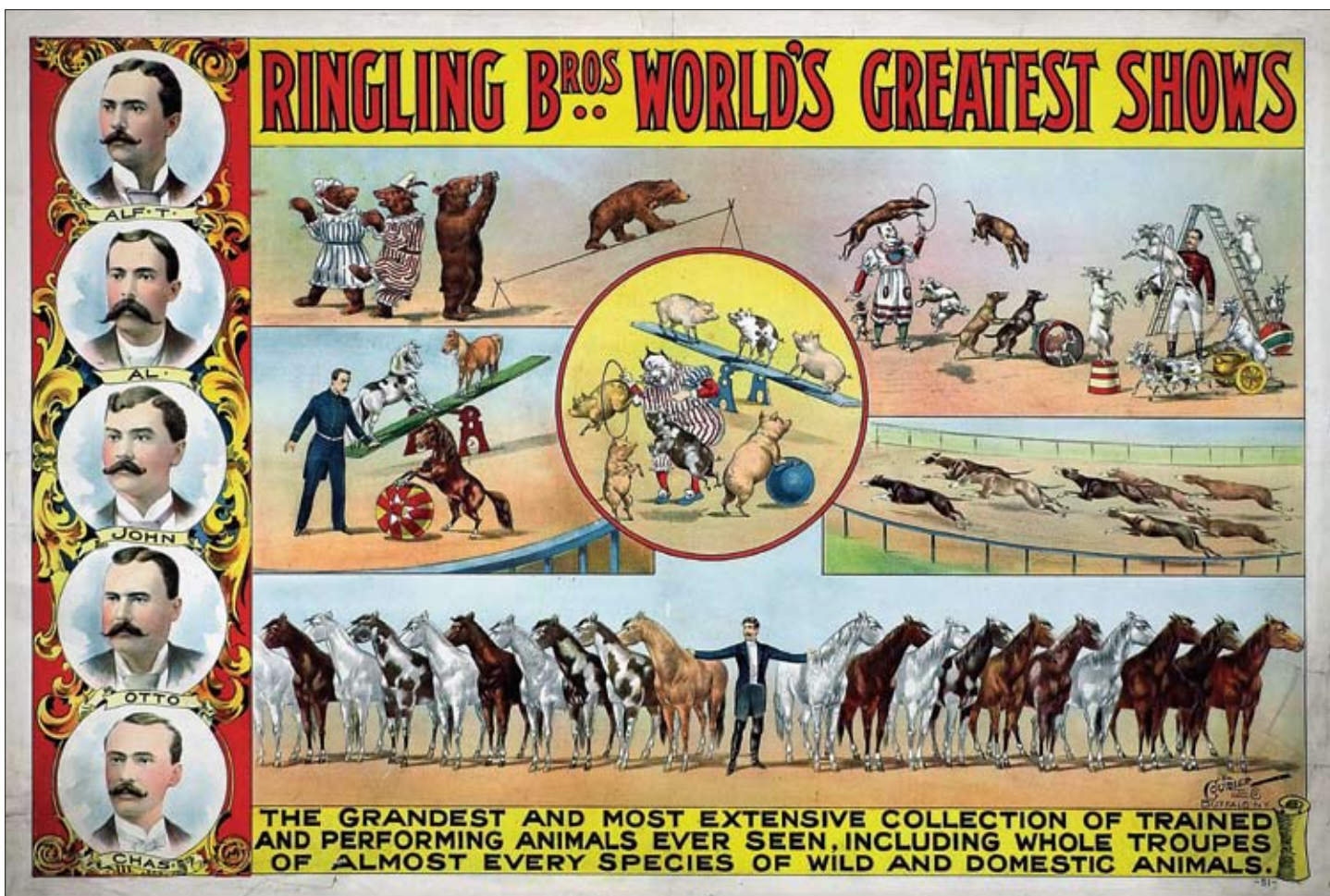


Endnotes

1. The poster at Circus World Museum has a date tag for Potsdam, New York for Tuesday August 21 verifying that this poster was used as late as 1894 when Ringling played that town.
2. *Ringling Bros.' Official Route Book* (Buffalo: The Courier Company, 1892).
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ringling Bros.' Official Route Book* (Buffalo: The Courier Company, 1893).
5. *Ringling Bros.' Official Route Book*, 1892, op. cit.

of the era. A trio of ponies, 20 liberty horses, seven pigs, eight goats, along with an abundance of racing and cavort-

ing hounds are illustrated. Only the four comic bruins in the upper left take the collage a little off theme. **Bw**



Bigger than Life

by Chris Berry with images courtesy of Feld Entertainment

By the mid-1950s most American circuses had transitioned from rails to trucks. However, in parts of Europe, there were still a few small caravans that moved from village to village by horse-drawn wagons. One of those was owned by a Hungarian named Hugo Liebel, who was trying to survive Communism by continuing his family circus at a time when the Soviet Union was forcing strict political and social policies on his country.

One day in about 1956, the wagons of the Liebel Family Circus stopped at a farmhouse outside of Budapest to get water for its horses. When Hugo Liebel knocked at the door it was opened by a youngster who appeared to be a young child. "How old are you son?" the six-foot-two Liebel asked the small boy. "I am 17," he responded. "Where are your parents?" Liebel asked. "They are out picking corn."

When Mihaly Mezaros' parents returned from the field they spoke to the Liebels and heard about the opportunities the circus offered for their son. When the wagons began rolling, the teenager – only 33 inches tall – started his life in show business.¹ The Liebels already had a young son they called Tome (Tommy), and as a youngster the two had played together.



Michu's performances often included high-energy dances reminiscent of his native Hungary.



At the time of his retirement in 2001, Michu had been performing in the United States for 28 years.

The Hungarian Revolution soon followed and while most of the country's circuses became nationalized, some private shows continued to exist, including Budapest Variety, the new name of Hugo Liebel's dog and pony show which also included young Mihaly and several other little people.²

"He was a clown," Tome Liebel recalled, "and we had been clowning together since I was a little boy. We had about three or four different gags that he would do. He was a very funny man."³



Michu was rushed to New York only weeks after he was discovered by Irvin Feld, Trolle Rhodin (left) and Kenneth Feld (right). Although he would spend his career with the Blue Unit, Michu's American debut was on the Red Unit when the 103rd Edition premiered at Madison Square Garden in 1973.

About ten years after Mihaly started performing, Irvin Feld purchased Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey and soon he, his son Kenneth, and their European representative Trolle Rhodin, were scouring the world for unusual acts.

"We had always heard about the smallest man in the world," Kenneth Feld recalled more than 50 years later, but because the Liebels were not part of the state-sponsored circus, they were not permitted to meet with him. The Felds were insistent, and in February 1973 they were taken to a house about an hour outside of Budapest.

The group knew it was the right address as they made their way through an assortment of circus props and a small menagerie that included a bear and snakes. "We went into this house, my father, myself and Trolle Rhodin," Kenneth Feld recalled. "We were standing in the kitchen and this flash comes in. It was Michu, the smallest man in the world. We saw a real personality and we asked him if he wanted to come to the States."⁴

The Hungarian government had previously worked to book other circus acts for the Felds, and that positive relationship allowed them to cut through the typical bureau-

cratic red tape associated with such international transactions. Within a month, Mihaly Mezaros and Tome Liebel took off on their first airplane ride. Destination: New York. They were accompanied by Trolle Rhodin, who came up with the name "Michu." That name would become famous, and it would be his identification for the rest of his life.⁵

Michu arrived in the press room of John F. Kennedy Airport atop a large suitcase and brandishing a cigar. At the



A few days after the Red Unit opened in New York, Kenneth Feld took Michu to Washington where he joined the Blue Unit.

time he spoke only Hungarian and German, so Rhodin was his interpreter, first translating the story of how Michu was angry that U.S. Customs agents had confiscated a salami and a bag of snacks he had brought from Europe. The Hungarian explained that he smoothed over what could have been an international incident by spontaneously dancing in front of the Customs staff and other government officials. "I am afraid of American food," he said, "and if I do not get my daily spices my show will not be as good."⁶

When a reporter then asked about the 14-hour flight from Budapest, Michu said (through Rhodin) that, "when it comes time to return, he wants to walk back." The circus had proclaimed that Michu was the smallest human on earth and Michu agreed. "If you know someone smaller bring him around," he said.⁷



During the time they worked together, Tome Leibel and Michu perfected a comedy act that incorporated many classic clown gags.

The circus press releases always claimed that Michu – at 33 inches – was seven inches shorter than P. T. Barnum’s “General Tom Thumb.” As Charles Stratton aged, he did eventually peak at 40 inches, and records from as early as 1862 show that from the time he was 21, Tom Thumb was always at least one inch taller than Michu.⁸

On March 28, 1973, Michu made his American debut on the Red Unit of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. After he entered the center ring dressed in a Hungarian costume, Michu broke into a spirited Cossack dance, hurling his 23 pounds around the ring. After he took his bow, a six-foot seven-inch clown named “Buttons” (Leon McBryde) picked him up and took him to Irvin Feld’s private box. He was then, “handed around as a baby would be by doting relatives. Michu seemed to enjoy all of the chucking under his chin.”⁹

The star-studded performance featured some of the greatest acts of the era, including Gunther Gebel-Williams, Wolfgang Holzmair, The Flying Waynes and Pio Nock, yet when readers opened their newspapers the next day, they learned that “Mihaly Mezaros stole the show, there is no doubt about it.”¹⁰

Only a few days later Kenneth Feld and Michu flew to Washington, D.C. where he

joined the Blue Unit. As part of the publicity blitz, a photographer snapped a photo as a luggage inspector opened a suitcase only to find Michu inside.¹¹

David Rosenwasser was among those promoting the circus at that time and he recalled how Michu loved the spotlight. “He could ‘ham it up’ with the best of them. He really had a sense of comedy, and any time I asked him to do something he was there.”¹²

With hundreds of press notices from coast-to-coast, it was apparent that newspaper editors loved the Felds’ newest attraction. On April 26, not even one month after he had arrived in the United States, Michu was flown to Florida for the groundbreaking of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus World in Polk County, just south of Disneyworld.

The event was described as “a cluster of clowns, a coterie of politicians, a brass band, a piping calliope and 6,000 guests.” Michu led a parade of 16 hard-hatted elephants from behind a huge billboard that read, “The Circus Is Coming”, revealing the start of what was planned to be a \$50-million-dollar attraction.¹³

Clown Peggy Williams was among those who the circus flew in for the event. She remembered the impromptu performance that Michu gave that day. “Trolle Rhodin went to the person who was preparing the buffet and got a big empty wooden salad bowl. Michu did his Hungarian dance in the salad bowl! Again, that showed everyone how small he was.”¹⁴

In its review of the groundbreaking, *The Orlando Sentinel* reported that Michu was “the star of the ceremony,”



Only a few weeks after he arrived in the United States, Michu assisted in the groundbreaking for the Circus World theme park. He was pictured with Blue Unit ringmaster Harold Ronk, clown Lou Jacobs, Irvin Feld and 16 of the show’s elephants.

even though he could only speak three English phrases; “My name is Michu”; “State of Florida”; and “Y’all”. The reporter who interviewed him wrote, “It gets a bit confusing after a while, but he keeps his answers ‘short!’”¹⁵

That summer the circus was routed from Virginia Beach to Lubbock, Texas, a distance of 1,900 miles. On the day before the train arrived, Michu flew into Lubbock Regional Airport where he held a news conference with about 25 reporters who were on hand for his arrival. Some of their questions clearly amused him, as he went on about his appreciation of mini-skirts and tall girls.

He spoke “in a voice that matched his diminutive frame,” and told the group that he had learned about Texas through movies. One of the reporters wrote, “his tiny fingers are as delicate as a baby...his feet come nowhere near the ground...when he lights a cigarette it is disconcerting, to say the least.” The news conference ended after “he performed a dance to the assembled crowd and seemed to enjoy every step of it.”¹⁶

Whether he was in Texas or any other state, Michu always made news. Promoter Susannah Smith recalled working with him during an appearance in Houston. “The local Shriners organization had gone to great lengths to keep Ringling out of the Sam Houston Coliseum,” she recalled. The challenge eventually led to a court appearance, and as the date approached, Smith suggested a photo-op with Herman Short, Houston’s “law and order” police chief. Despite the lawman’s intimidating reputation, Smith asked for an appointment. “Michu behaved for the Chief, did his dance and posed,” she recalled. “The ‘Short and the Shortest’ pho-



Michu loved the camera and the camera loved him. The circus marketing team created memorable stunts which appeared in newspapers around the world.

to made the front page of the *Houston Chronicle* and Chief Short’s implied endorsement of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey did not hurt.¹⁷

On September 30 Michu celebrated his 34th birthday at the Met Sports Center in Bloomington, Minnesota, and as flashbulbs lit up the center ring, Michu and Irvin Feld cut a six-foot-tall cake. Photographs from the birthday party once again appeared in newspapers nationwide.

Just before the 1974 season began, Irvin Feld was told his new attraction had a problem. “Since it was contract time, I was sure Michu felt that he wanted more money,” Feld said. The problem, however, was in his private compartment on the train. “Michu was asking for a wash basin, more his size.” The circus agreed to his request. “Michu deserves it,” Feld laughed.¹⁸

A few days later, the little comic crashed a press conference at the Wig and Pen restaurant on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. The New York press corps had gathered to see Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier talk about their upcoming rematch for the Heavyweight Championship when Michu



“The Greatest” traded jabs with “The Smallest” after Michu crashed a news conference where Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier were taking questions about an upcoming heavyweight title bout. Both Ali and Michu understood the value of good promotion.

showed up in boxing gloves that were half as big as he was.

Ali looked at the 23-pound Michu and said, "What are you – a man or a boy?" Michu glared at him and growled in his high-pitched voice, "I will destroy you." When the champ heard his own words coming out of the mouth of a 33-inch man, he broke up.¹⁹ Michu then socked Ali in the jaw with all of his might. The heavyweight champion then took a deep breath and blew hard, spinning Michu back about three feet. It was circus press agency at its best, and the story was carried from coast-to-coast.²⁰

The relationship with the boxer was rekindled when the circus was in Miami. Muhammad Ali's trainer, Angelo Dundee, had requested tickets and promoter David Rosenwasser asked if Ali would "do a little schtick with Mishu." During the performance that season, Michu would pop out of a small box and begin dancing in his traditional Hungarian garb, but that night he appeared wearing giant boxing trunks that went to his ankles. "Ali then walked from the audience into the center ring where they shadowboxed. People went crazy," Rosenwasser recalled.²¹

Although Tome Liebel had been in the United States for only a little over a year, he had learned enough English that he could now serve as Michu's official translator. Reporters would frequently ask if Michu had a girlfriend in Hungary. Tome would respond with made up stories about the girl that had been left behind. "It sounded so good and it was so romantic that sometimes I believed it myself," he joked, remembering the time that Irvin Feld asked him, "What about that girl back in Hungary?" When Tome told him that there was no girl and that he had made up the story, "Mr. Feld just laughed and said, 'But we are going to get him one.'"

Tome then called his mother in Hungary, and she began searching, eventually finding a woman who was a factory worker and about the same size as Michu. Liebel said his mother showed her Ringling programs and convinced her that she would not have to do anything other than ride in a carriage, "You are going to be a princess," she was told.

On November 17, 1975, Juliana Pimvicska arrived at Kennedy Airport along with Trolle Rhodin and two other little people from Liebel's circus, Sandor Rasky and Elizabeth Ritter. Although newspapers originally reported that Juliana was Michu's fiancé, in reality she was going to play the role of his wife when the circus recreated "Tom Thumb's Wedding" the following season.

According to Liebel, Juliana did not fully understand the nature of her job. "She was already scared,"

Tome recalled. "I said, 'ma'am you will not marry him. Just take the rose and the diamond ring.' She said, 'No way. Your mama told me that I am going to be a princess in a carriage.'" Tome said that after a brief exchange, he convinced her to meet with the reporters, though his Hungarian translation of their questions was different than what was actually being asked. "We went into the press room and cameras clicked, lights and filming. I said, 'how was the food on the plane?' She said, 'The food was very good, and she smiled.'"

Michu then said, "Oh, my love, I am so happy," while toasting her with his high-pitched voice. A mock ceremony followed, and the photographers insisted that she put on the ring. Michu tried to slip it on her tiny finger six times, and six times she refused. "This is show business. Smile my love," he said. Juliana did not give even a glimpse of emotion until Michu danced around her while singing *My Darling Clementine* in Hungarian. Only then did she show a hint of a smile.²²

The 1976 edition of *The Greatest Show on Earth* commemorated "200 Years of the Circus in America," and featured a re-enactment of the 1863 wedding of Tom Thumb and Lavinia Warren. "Mishu was quite a personality and we realized that it would be something to recreate the wedding," Kenneth Feld recalled. "It was a huge promotion, and we did huge business. People loved it. It was tongue in cheek, and Michu was a showman. He just loved to perform."²³

During the ceremony officiated by ringmaster Harold Ronk, the couple exchanged vows twice a day and Michu answered "I do" in the biggest voice he could muster. "It is a good act," he said of the wedding display, adding "I never heard of Tom Thumb though until I came here."²⁴ He had also never heard of Joe Namath, but when he learned the



Michu once joked that he was a ladies' man, "Just like Casanova," and like the Italian lover, his exploits were legendary.

New York Jets quarterback had Hungarian roots, he asked “Broadway Joe” to be his best man – another story that was carried in newspapers across the country.²⁵

The annual television program, *Highlights of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey*, was taped in January 1976 and Michu again stole the show by popping out of a large guitar held by host Johnny Cash. He then sang a duet rendition of *Oh My Darling Clementine* in Hungarian as Cash sang it in English. During the taping Michu darted past his bride-to-be, Juliana, and went to clown alley where he lit up a cigarette. “It was much easier working in the factory,” Juliana told a reporter, adding, “I have known him for only one month.”²⁶

While the circus was in New York, a 250-pound wedding cake featuring the life-size likeness of Michu and Juliana was rolled into the center ring of Madison Square Garden, April 1. The \$4,000 cake was created in Washington State and flown across country for the ceremony. During the display, 52 children were brought from the audience to witness the ceremony. But for one teenager from Morristown, New Jersey, it did not seem quite right. “Did you notice he did not kiss her?” observed 14-year-old Ben Pensiero. “All he did was dance around. It cannot be a real marriage if he did not kiss her.”²⁷

By the time the circus reached San Francisco in late August, the travel and performing appeared to be taking a toll on Juliana. “Though Michu was still in high spirits, his bride seemed a bit bored,” a critic wrote, adding, “She is – I hate to say – a head taller than the gaudily attired groom and may not like the whole idea.”²⁸

A few days later the Hungarian couple that played the best man and maid of honor in the spec actually *did* get married in the center ring of the Oakland Coliseum. Sandor Rasky and Elizabeth Ritter were wed between performances. Michu was Rasky’s Best Man and Juliana served as a bridesmaid.²⁹

Whether it was his star status, or the challenges that he faced by simply being different than others, Michu quickly developed a reputation as a temperamental artist, who frequently drank, often to the point of being inebriated. When he had too much to drink, he often became angry.

Tim Torkildson was one of those who experienced Michu’s fury. Torkildson had been a member of the Clown College class of 1970, and after several years performing he left the circus to become a Mormon missionary. When he completed the two-year mission, he returned to the Blue Unit.

Torkildson remembered an incident that happened one day before a church service. As he was studying the Book of Mormon, Michu poured a beer on the clown’s holy book. In an instant Torkildson picked up the star of the show, locked



Michu and Juliana Pimvicska exchanged vows twice a day when they recreated “The Wedding of Tom Thumb” as part of the 106th Edition which commemorated “200 Years of the Circus in America”.

him in his trunk, and headed to church.

“In the circus,” he said, “there is an unwritten rule that you never touch or abuse the little people. I had crossed the line.” Although Michu was rescued from the trunk, he was, “madder than a wet hen.” When management found out, the Blue Unit began looking for a new clown.³⁰

“[Performance Director] Charly Baumann knew how important he was,” said former Blue Unit General Manager Mike Melssen, adding “and Michu knew his status. Even though he was small, he knew that he carried a lot of weight.”³¹

That status was one of the reasons why he was featured in a western-themed spectacle in 1982. The production number included a dance hall that occupied most of the three rings, as well as bareback riding, children from the audience riding in stagecoaches pulled by elephants, along with cowboy clowns. The star was the pistol-packing “Michu, the Marshal of Marshmallow Gulch” who wore “a one-gallon hat.”³²

Because of Michu’s penchant for drinking, he was frequently so inebriated that he had to be replaced by his understudy, “Sandor, the Sheriff of Marshmallow Gulch.” Peggy Williams was the Assistant Performance Director for the Blue Unit that season and remembered one performance when she was forced to pull Michu from the show after he had too much to drink. In his anger he began running through the busy backstage area, sliding under elephants and causing a general disruption. “I could not risk him being injured so I had him put into a trash can and I locked him inside.”

While the show was in New York, Michu appeared with Kenneth Feld on *Late Night with David Letterman*. During the brief – and somewhat awkward – interview, Letterman



The Blue Unit spectacle had a western theme in 1982, and the star was "Michu the Marshal of Marshmallow Gulch." One of his longtime partners was clown Richard Fick who stood six-feet six-inches tall.

tried to get Mishu to answer some softball questions. "What are your problems?" Mishu was asked. "The ladies don't want to leave me alone," he said without cracking a smile. "I am just like Casanova."³³

Michu always had an eye for the ladies, and according to David Rosenwasser, "If a woman was interviewing him, whether it was print or broadcast, he got as close to them as he could and still remain within the bounds of reasonably good taste."³⁴

During the same circus performance that featured Axel Gautier's elephants, Elvin Bale and Miguel Vasquez' quadruple somersault, Michu presented an act with ponies and trained standard poodles. Compared to their tiny trainer, the dogs were so big that when they stood on their hind legs, they towered over him.

He also appeared as "Doctor Michu" performing with clowns Richard Fick, Huel Speight and Jon Weiss. During the routine Weiss would lay on a table, complaining of stomach pain. "Nurse" Fick would put the doctor's bag on the table and the diminutive "doctor" would pop out of it. "Michu thought it was funny to step on my face while I was laying there and kick me once in a while," Weiss recalled. "So, I

started pinching him on his leg. One day he showed me that his leg was all black and blue and I felt so bad."³⁵

It was then that they began a friendship that would continue for the rest of Michu's life.

At that time Michu traveled by motor-home, and Jon Weiss and his soon-to-be wife Laura were assigned the job of driving it from town to town. Weiss has fond memories of traveling from coast to coast. "At one point he was smoking Benson & Hedges cigarettes," he recalled. "Michu had long hair and I can remember people saying to me, 'How can you let her smoke?' I would say 'her?' it is *him!* If they did start questioning him, he might go off on them."

As Jon and Laura Weiss got to know Michu, they all became closer. Jon was still sleeping one Sunday morning when Laura gave Michu a Father's Day card. "After he read it, he said, 'I love you', and she said, 'I love you too Michu.' He then grabbed her hand and put it over his heart and said, 'No. I love you more than that.'" Weiss said that

his girlfriend was shocked and quickly pulled her hand back as she firmly said, "No Michu. I love you like a *father!*"³⁶

In 1984, Michu was back as "Tom Thumb" during the historic spec that marked the 100th anniversary of the Ringling Bros. circus. The poster that season included the



At the beginning of his career, Michu was remembered for his comedy and sight gags. In 1982 he appeared as the trainer of ponies and standard poodles. The dogs dwarfed him when they stood on their back legs.

image of Michu along with the five Ringling brothers, as well as Irvin and Kenneth Feld, Frosty Little, The Flying Vasquez and Wade Burck with his white tigers. During the performance Michu appeared wearing a silver top hat and tails, riding in a silver coach.

The next year, when the circus was across the Hudson River from Manhattan at the Meadowlands, General Manager Mike Melssen learned that Michael Jackson would be coming to the performance. "When I saw him, he was in disguise, and he would not sit in the house seats," he recalled. "He would sit in front of ring three near the curtain."³⁷

Jackson was able to attend the circus because he was in the area filming a music video with director Martin Scorsese. A few days after that performance, Jon Weiss was approached by one of the show's promoters who said that the pop star wanted to meet Michu. Although Michu was initially reluctant, Weiss convinced him to make the trip to the Brooklyn subway station where Jackson was filming the music video for his soon-to-be hit record *Bad*. "They picked us up and took us to the set," Weiss recalled. "Michael had director's chairs for all of us, he brought us into his motorhome and we had cookies and milk. That whole experience was incredible."³⁸

In the years that followed, Michael Jackson and Michu developed a true friendship. In 1991 Michu appeared on the cover of Jackson's *Dangerous* album, where he is seen standing on the head of P. T. Barnum, and in 1992 he appeared with Jackson in a commercial for Pepsi titled "Dreams". Jon Weiss said their friendship should not be a surprise. "Michael appreciated the little people. He appreciated Michu."

After leaving the circus in 1986, Michu permanently moved to Southern California and soon became a regular at the Neverland Ranch where Jackson had custom furniture built for him. He was also on hand for Jackson's 1994 wedding to Lisa Marie Presley, and accompanied them on their honeymoon to Hungary. When Michael Jackson died in 2009, Michu attended his memorial service.³⁹

After he relocated to California, Michu began appearing in motion pictures and on television. In September of 1986, a new situation comedy appeared on NBC titled *ALF*. It was the story of an "Alien Life Form" who crashed into a suburban home and had begun living with the family.

During the first season of the program Michu was an

uncredited member of the cast, appearing in the *ALF* costume whenever the alien was seen walking, running or standing. The upper-body shots however were usually of a mechanical puppet.

During his "Hollywood period", Michu also had small roles in horror movies titled *Waxwork*, *Freaked* and *Warlock: The Armageddon*, as well as the comedies *Look Who's Talking* and *Big Top Pee Wee*.

The money he made at the television and film studios allowed Michu to purchase a home on 125th Street in the Los Angeles suburb of Hawthorne. In May of 1987 he paid \$6,000 to rename the street to Michu Lane. According to his friend David Varga, "I showed him the street on the map, and he said, 'that's me.'" Michu Lane is only one-third of a block long.⁴⁰

In April of 1990, 17 years after he first arrived at Kennedy Airport, Mihaly Mezaros became an American citizen. "This is the biggest day of my life," he told the *Los Angeles Times*. "I am the happiest man in the world."

When the ceremony ended the Federal judge, who was six-feet-two inches tall, leaned down to shake Michu's hand. "You are a nice guy, judge," he said. The judge smiled back, "You are a nice guy, too, fellow citizen."

Michu then gripped his Certificate of Naturalization to his chest, and – dressed in a tuxedo and top hat – danced a few steps in his size-three patent leather shoes, and spontaneously started singing *God Bless America*.⁴¹



Michu was very close to Michael Jackson. He appeared on Jackson's album covers and in his music videos, and when "The King of Pop" married Lisa Marie Presley, Michu accompanied the couple on their honeymoon to his native Hungary.

photo by Andras Kegyes

Michu was called back to *The Greatest Show on Earth* in 1998. The performance that season had a sideshow theme and he appeared with a former cabdriver named Aurangzeb Kahn who claimed to be eight-feet tall. The contrast created an impressive "big and little" visual during the spec.

Those who had previously worked with Michu remarked that the years he had spent living in California had mellowed him. Most importantly, he had given up smoking and drinking.

During each performance, elephant handler Randy Peterson lined up behind the float that carried Michu and Kahn. He believed that the time away from the show had softened Michu. "He treated me very well. We had a lot of fun and quite often I had my oldest daughter with me. He thought she was the greatest thing. He was genuinely nice to her and would make her laugh."

In 2000 Jon and Laura Weiss were re-assigned from the Red to the Blue Unit and when they arrived, they rekindled their friendship with Michu.

That season Jon and Michu appeared as a team throughout the performance, paired up in a number of gags, "It was a dream come true," Weiss said, adding. "He had great stage presence, and when I did my balancing act Michu was right there with me. I was balancing heavy stuff over his head, but it never fazed him." The circus ended with Michu and Jon

pear in the Vargas ring and sign autographs, the plan never developed.⁴²

In early June of 2016, Weiss rushed to the hospital after he heard that his former partner and friend had been found unconscious and was in a coma. "It was tough to see him there," he recalled. "I would sit and talk to him and tell him how special he was to so many people." Although Weiss had been told that Michu had no brain activity, as he spoke he felt his friend pull his hand closer. "It was like he was listening," Weiss said.

Mihaly Mezaros, who had been one of the major stars of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, died on June 12, 2016. He was 69 years old. He was cremated and his ashes are now cared for by a friend in Palm Springs, California.⁴³

During his career with the circus, some thought of Michu as a temperamental and vulgar male chauvinist who exhibited anger, especially while drinking. Others knew him as a kind, friendly man, an entertainer at heart. "If I make people laugh," he once said, "I feel good. Everybody is happy. That is what I like."⁴⁴



Jon Weiss and Michu first performed together in 1982 and over the decades they developed a strong friendship. In 2000 they appeared together in several displays, including the "Human Clown 'N Ball" finale.

Weiss performing "The Human Clown 'N Ball" as a finale.

When the 130th edition closed, Michu left the circus after 44 years of performances, retiring to his home in Hawthorne, California.

Not long after Michu retired the Weiss's also left Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey and joined Circus Vargas. Jon remembered being in Torrance, California when his old friend came on the lot, soon after he had suffered a stroke. "It was quite special for everyone who was at the circus," he recalled. "To have Michu there was like having royalty visit." Although there was talk of hiring the aging performer to ap-

Several years after Michu's death, Jon Weiss reflected on the impact that his friend had on his own life, a message that he has tried to spread since. "I used to talk to underprivileged kids during the show and I would say 'See Michu? See how small he is?' That is the first thing that you see, but you need to look at who the person is on the inside. We all do that at times. We judge people before we know them. I do not notice his height anymore. I know him for who he is."⁴⁵ **Bw**

Acknowledgements

The story of Michu's career could not have been told without the assistance of Kenneth Feld, Tome Liebel, Mike Melssen, Scott Michaels, Randy Peterson, Bill Powell, David Rosenwasser, Susannah Smith, Timothy Tegge, Jon Weiss, Peggy Williams and Steven Yaros.

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 44. Daniel Rodericks, “He Walks Among Giants, Casts a Small Shadow,” *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, Mar. 23, 1976, p. C-22.
 45. Weiss, op-cit.



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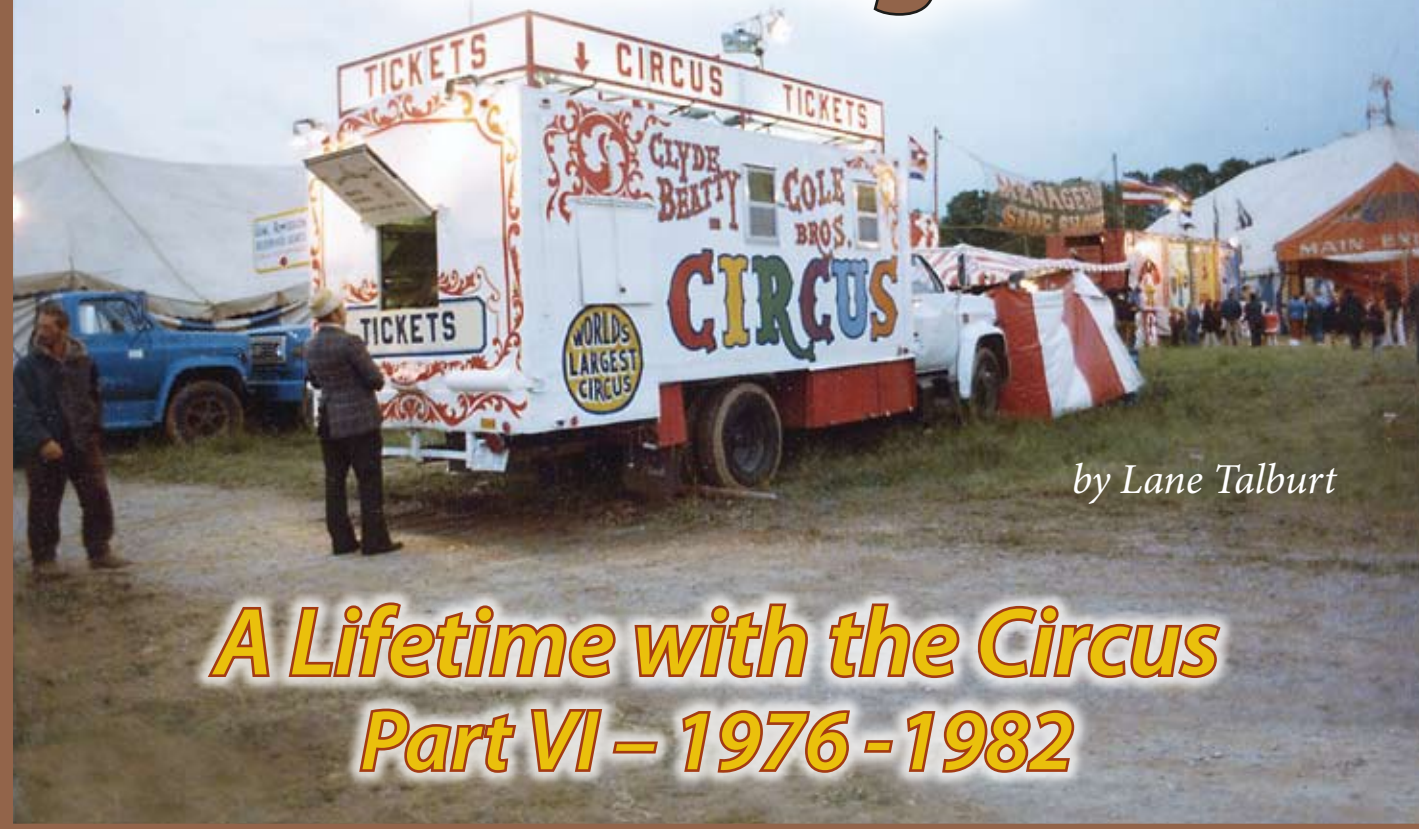
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John Pugh



by Lane Talburt

A Lifetime with the Circus *Part VI – 1976 - 1982*

Sunset illuminated the early midway activities prior to the night show when Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. played Westchester, Pennsylvania on May 19, 1976.

Jerry Cash photograph

Just before the stroke of midnight on December 31, 1981, Johnny Pugh became a circus magnate. The future of Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus was finally and completely in his hands – save for finding a financial partner. Right up to the moment that he affixed his signature to a deal to take over the tented giant, the British-born-but-American-tested showman was asking himself, “Do I really want to own a circus?” The agreement teetered precariously on a skittish, unpredictable second signatory, Jerry Collins, a Sarasota multimillionaire who had fronted the money to keep the show on the road since the mid-1950s. Until that late hour on New Year’s Eve 1981, Collins and his late partner, Frank McClosky, had frequently kept their general manager out of the loop on decisions impacting Beatty-Cole’s future direction.

A third party vital to the deal was the Florida State University Foundation, which was relieved to find a qualified buyer for the money-losing albatross that had been dumped in its lap. Collins needed both Florida State and Pugh to sign the deal so that

he could count the transaction as a donation to offset his substantial 1981 tax burden.

Of his new inheritance, with circus enthusiast Doug Holwadel as co-owner, Pugh was less than exuberant. “When we made the deal with FSU, we knew we were buying strictly



Outdoor shows are always at the mercy of the elements. This photograph captured the moment when a huge gust of wind picked up the canvas as the big top was being set up at Philadelphia’s Liberty Bell Park on May 20, 1976.

Jerry Cash photograph

an excuse to play circus. I was the manager, so I knew how bad everything was. I mean, the equipment was in terrible shape.”¹

During the previous decade, Pugh had led Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. through a series of significant changes: the shift in 1977 from back-breaking one-day to multi-day stands on parking lots of malls, a short-lived arena tour in 1980, and the switch in leadership at the top following McClosky’s death in 1979.

Against a backdrop of economic hardship in many communities, Pugh’s main task was to keep the show moving and assuring on-time performances, in spite of the unexpected. His challenges were no different than those endured by other under-canvas circus managers: muddy and sometimes inaccessible lots, occasional big top blowdowns, the egos of principal performers, constant manpower shortages, and finicky circusgoers.

Collins’ second bid to sell his circus

The Beatty-Cole contingent was still recovering from a 1975 tour covering a record 20,000 miles in 217 cities and towns when the outfit’s employees learned in early 1976 that the owner wanted to give the show away as a tax write-off. Collins first attempt in 1974 to sell the show outright was, put simply, a dud.

“Circus may be donated to Florida State,” blared a dominant headline on the front page of the university’s hometown *Tallahassee Democrat* February 19, 1976.

“Jerry Collins...said if an offer were made it would probably include the entire three-ring circus with its tent, clowns and animals... But the tax advantage isn’t the only motive Collins, 67, said. ‘I want to unload the responsibilities while I can. This gives me the power to decide what to do with the circus rather than have the government do it later...’

“A gift, such as proposed by Collins, would be a ‘gift in kind,’ (FSU Foundation president Hal Wilkins) said, and the foundation would have to look at it carefully ‘to make sure it would produce something for the students at the university.’

“Another problem would be whether such a gift would end up costing the university money, Wilkins said.”²

In reality, Collins could offer only half of Beatty-Cole, with operating partner Frank McClosky remaining in charge of the show. That was a deal-killer, but university officials kept the door open for future negotiations with the wealthy owner of two Florida dog racing tracks.

Back at the DeLand winter quarters, Pugh was rehabbing his motorized circus from an arduous tour of mostly one-day stands over more than half of the continental United States. Though the 1976 route was being pared down by some 4,000 miles, general agent Joe McMahon had still booked Beatty-Cole into some 215 communities in 26 states. The show’s overhaul may have accounted for the new tour’s late opening date on April 5 at Brunswick, Georgia.

Fewer than a dozen stands in 1976 were for a single day. And for the first time since 1959, there were no indoor performances, as the Long Island Arena – site of the show’s opening date for the past decade and a half – had been sold. The circus closed at its DeLand quarters December 5, having logged almost 16,000 miles.



The colorful wagons containing Dave Hoover’s lions and tigers were loaded in the same “piggyback” fashion as railroad circuses of an earlier era.

John Goodall photograph, Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

Pugh had expressed concerns about the length and breadth of the route and its effects on troupers and equipment. “I suddenly looked at the towns [on the 1975 route], and I said, ‘Why are we going out West? East is where the money is,’” Pugh recalled in a 2022 interview.³ “We’ve got to cut down the number of spots. Otherwise, we could be eaten up in the travel.”⁴

Attesting to anxiety among the touring troupe over exhausting one-day stands and the show’s future was a letter written in late season by young band leader Charlie Bertini to his immediate predecessor on the bandstand:

“Hello, Chuck [Schlarbaum]! Just arrived in sunny Florida (Gainesville) last night. Feels like

almost being home – wish we were closing now (and so does everyone else). But we're only 8 weeks away...McClosky is back with us again and he is quite pissed about the ridiculousness of booking the show and the resulting long jumps and backtracking. Also, Jerry Collins is here today..."⁵



Charles Bertini replaced longtime bandmaster Chuck Schlarbaum in 1976. Bertini's musicians played a score that included traditional circus music at a time when many shows had switched to recordings.

John Goodall photograph, Circus World Museum Wisconsin Historical Society

Recalling the partners' visit to the Gainesville lot, Pugh said, "they were very secretive." McClosky and Collins were likely discussing what changes would be required to place the circus on paved surfaces of shopping malls the following season. Pugh said he was not briefed fully on the new concept until the show returned to DeLand for its winter hibernation.⁶

Beatty-Cole shops the malls

McClosky appointed the plan's originator, 32-year-old David J. Mobbs, as national director of marketing. It was Mobbs, formerly with Ringling and Hoxie Bros. circuses, who devised the change of format from grassy fields to paved shopping malls. The young promoter, interviewed by his hometown newspaper in Ithaca, New York, reasoned that:

"Scarcity of open areas for setting up the big top were pushing the circus further and further out of town. Why not play regional malls for three-day runs, and draw from the same areas they used to hit day-by-day? The problem was convincing the malls at first.

"When I designed it, I realized the last thing a mall wants is a circus in the parking lot. They want the activity inside, where the stores are. So, we worked out a lot of activity in the mall, with a clown who travels ahead of the show, coloring contests, things like that.

"And as an added inducement to get them in there, we sell the adult tickets for \$4 only if they buy in advance (inside the mall), and for \$5 at the gate after the circus arrives."⁷

Though Pugh was not involved in the decision-making process, he enthusiastically threw his support behind the Mobbs plan.

To further boost the show's revenues, McClosky hired an ex-Ringling promoter, Timothy J. Stinson, as director of promotion and publicity, and veteran circus publicist Jerry Digney, whose florid prose memorialized the circus' venerated namesake:

"No one has ever entered the large steel arena and paralleled the showmanship and veracity of the one and only Clyde Beatty, still considered the world's most extraordinary wild animal trainer.

"Beatty passed away 12 years ago, but his colorful legend lives on, and today, in the imposing steel arena, Dave Hoover, a long-time protégé of the "King of Beasts" perpetuates his gallant and colorful style....

"The Circus today continues to carry the name of the most astonishing sawdust sensation ever... the master of sneering, sinister jungle beasts – the one and only Clyde Beatty!"⁸

Two smaller Acme Corp. units sharing DeLand quarters underwent title and route expansion, per a *Bandwagon* review of the 1977 circus season:

"King Bros. title was changed to King Bros.-Cole Combined and Sells & Gray had a new moniker, Hagan-Wallace-Sells & Gray... The new titles were given so as to beef up their image in the public eye since the smaller shows would be picking up many of the dates formerly made by Beatty-Cole.

"Later in the season Doug Lyon of Vargas was signed as vice president in charge of marketing to beef up the team promoting the malls...Business at the new mall dates...was pretty spotty most of the season."⁹



For years Barry Young was a familiar face on the Beatty-Cole lot. He is seen here working to complete the assembly of attachments to a center pole bale ring in Ann Arbor, Michigan on August 19, 1976.

Jack Stubbs photograph, Ann Arbor District Library

percentage of the advance and ten percent of the gate on show days. Plus, they would include us in their advertising budget to promote the circus coming to the mall. And they would allow us to paper their malls at that time.”¹¹

Another advantage of two- and three-day stays was the potential to secure additional media coverage. The resulting print and electronic media accounts often appeared on the same day, as well as the next, thus boosting gate and concession revenues. By contrast, when the circus played mainly one-day stands, media accounts appeared the next day, when Beatty-Cole was already in the next town.¹²

The new format also was a boon for circus folk, according to marketing director David Mobbs. [In former years] “performers wouldn’t even see a store for a week or more, parked out on some farmer’s field. Now they’re going broke because they’re always at a mall – and they love it.”¹³

Likewise, the show’s vehicles benefited from

Mall dates “good on our health”

Pugh remained Beatty-Cole’s general manager. The three-a-week stands would enable the show’s roadies, especially drivers, to catch up on sleep between stands. Recalling his days in the 1960s as an assistant manager following the fleet on tour:

“I’d say, ‘Oops, the wreck of the week.’ And not because the guy was a bad driver. It was because they were tired. You know, putting tents up and doing two shows and tearing it down and driving 50 to a hundred miles wears them out. And that’s why we went to multi-day stands. And it’s been good on the equipment, good on our health, and sometimes good on business.”¹⁰

The arrangement benefited both the malls and Beatty-Cole, Pugh said.

“They didn’t charge us for the lot. They only charged us for repair of the lot...They got a certain



Sunny skies and warm weather brought large crowds to see the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus. For the first time since 1959, Beatty-Cole played only tented dates in 1976.

John Goodall photograph, Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

the paved surfaces. Pugh said, “Oh, wow! Instead of pulling them off in the rain, we just drive them off. And we had 34 semis at that time.”¹⁴

However, no mall setup could have protected the circus

against a sudden windstorm at the end of a four-day stand at Rochester, New York on July 31. Showman Billy Barton reported the incident in *The Circus Report*.

"The second [Sunday] show was over, most of the acts had pulled out, the jigger had been loosened on the big top, most of the quarter poles had been jerked down, there was a man dropping the main-falls from the outside peaks, when a storm with intense winds struck, picked up the big top and tossed it 50 feet into the backyard where performers' trailers had been parked.

"A man working on the tent clung perilously to the bale ring, rode the tent through the air and landed, miraculously unharmed. Two other workers inside the tent suffered only minor injuries.

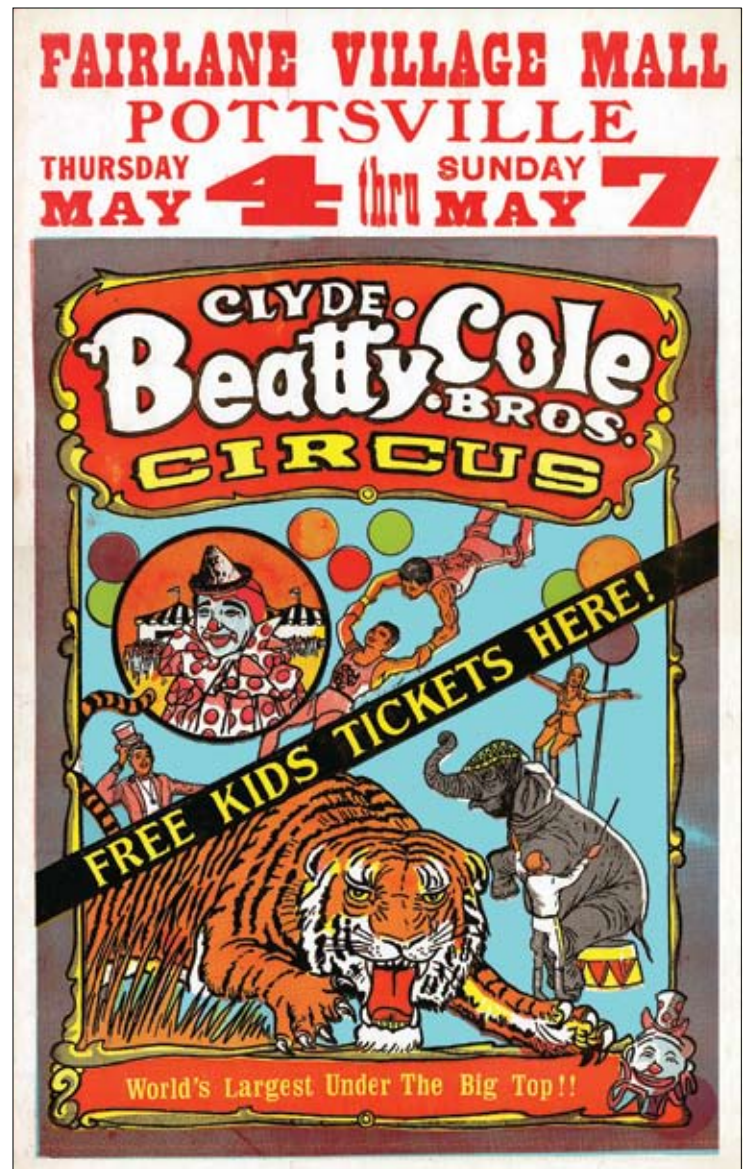
"But the 150 x 350 big top suffered heavy damage, ripped from one end to other by the seat wagons, folded but still in position. The large side show tent was also toppled in the storm, but was apparently little the worse for its upending.

"On the following day, August 1, in Lockport, New York, the remnants of the big top were spread over the shopping center and a concentrated effort was made to repair the canvas. Working feverishly, the show personnel, including most performers, patched, sewed and glued the pieces together to make the 4:30 P.M. matinee, which got underway only 30 minutes late."¹⁵



Once the circus was on the road in 1976 and weather permitted, wild animal trainer Dave Hoover showcased his artistic abilities painting the side show banner panels.

John Goodall photograph, Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society



In 1977 the circus began transitioning from a back-breaking schedule of one-day stands to multiple-day engagements at shopping malls.

Tegge Circus Archive

Nor were all dates played on hard surfaces, Pugh noted. "We played a few fairground lots, just so we could keep those sponsored dates."¹⁶

Mobbs acknowledged booking a shopping mall that turned out to be too small for the show's footprint. With the circus fleet already on site, Mobbs "had to charter a plane to fly back from advance promotion to negotiate with the competing mall across the street to move it there. 'And it wasn't easy,'" Mobbs told an interviewer.¹⁷

For the most part, the new arrangement worked out to the satisfaction of the circus and malls. In Lebanon, Pennsylvania, for example, the local paper enthused (probably copied word-for-word from a circus publicity release) in advance of the May 2-4 engagement:

"The Lebanon Valley Mall is among the first to share the honors of this debut. The blending of

the popular family thriller, Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus, with the public's growing preference for enclosed shopping places, is another step in which Beatty-Cole responds to changing time... In addition to the big top, there will also be the world's largest circus sideshow, menagerie and other midway attractions."¹⁸

The Beatty-Cole entourage returned to its quarters on the site of the former Volusia County fairgrounds after a Thanksgiving weekend finale at Tampa on November 24-27. The big show had traveled about 9,500 miles – the shortest distance under the Beatty-Cole title.

Although McClosky had deemed the mall format successful and that it would continue in 1978, the good news was tempered by renewed rumors that Beatty-Cole might be down for the count. Though there was no public mention, McClosky had been stricken with cancer and would spend almost the entire summer of 1978 resting in the Bahamas. His inaccessibility presented major barriers to the show's day-to-day and winter quarters operations for Pugh.

Major changes were ahead. Joe McMahon, the show's general agent for the previous nine tours, resigned December 1, 1977. On the surface, McMahon was accepting a better offer from Hoxie Bros. "It was surprising to me that Joe

went somewhere else," Pugh recalled as he disclosed that the underlying factor was a behind-the-scenes feud between two wives: Mrs. McMahon and Mrs. McClosky. Brenda McClosky was the victor – at least in the short term. But Pugh would bring back McMahon as Beatty-Cole's brigade manager following Frank McClosky's death two years later.¹⁹

McMahon's replacement for the 1978 tour was W. J. "Bill" English, who had originally built and managed Sells & Gray from 1962 to 1967. In addition to reclaiming management of his old show, English was given increased responsibilities to coordinate routing of all three Acme corporate entities. Art Branning continued to support Pugh as Beatty-Cole manager, Edna Antes remained as treasurer, and Walter Davis replaced longtime showman Arnold Maley as road treasurer. Harry Rawls came on the show to watch over highly profitable concessions inside the big top and on the midway.

The suave, mustachioed Count Nicholas returned to announce the performance, whose players were contracted by Wilson Storey. Opening each show was Dave Hoover with his own pride of lions and tigers in the big cage. Fred Logan, assisted by family members, reigned supreme in the three rings and on the hippodrome track with the show-owned herd of elephants. The advance was the responsibility of two recently hired managers: Douglas Lyon, who brought expe-



This photograph was taken in 1977, the last season that Beatty-Cole had a big top made of white canvas. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, elephant superintendent Freddie Logan was responsible for a herd of 13 elephants.

James Cole photograph

rience in steering Circus Vargas to malls (a concept introduced on the West Coast by Cliff Vargas in 1973), and Tim Stinson, an experienced Ringling promoter for a decade.

Lyon not only assumed the duties of general agent, but also managed the revised activities of a cadre of 13 marketing directors, many of them young and fairly fresh out of college. The promotional staff scored a major pre-season hit in a national publication. *Sports Illustrated* humorously endorsed the idea of enticing corporations and nonprofit organization to buy out Beatty-Cole performances.

“The Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus suggests something special: rent the circus, for \$15,000 a day. For the 15 grand you get 100 performers, 10 elephants, eight lions, eight tigers, horses and a band, arriving on 70 vehicles....

“Tim Stinson, a vice president with the Winter Park, Florida, circus, says... ‘A person who rents the circus can be the ringmaster if he so desires—no charge for the top hat, tails, whistle and microphone. Or he can be a clown, which seems more appropriate. Diamonds are forever,’ says Stinson, but a three-ring tented circus in your own backyard is forever.”²⁰

With the newly assembled advance team chomping at the bit, troupers launched the 1978 tour at Fort Walton Beach March 27-29. Improvements noted in the opening stand by a *Bandwagon* contributor included “light towers for each of the three rings, illuminated ring curbs, and the

installation of showers in the clown sleeper.”²¹

On the other hand, “The lure of the big top is still, however, the Beatty-Cole Circus’ greatest asset. A brand-new tent, with multi-colored stripes, 17,000 feet of cable and 14,000 feet of rope, comprise the main ingredient.”²²

Promoting big cities “very difficult”

Repeating the previous year’s circuit of less than 10,000 miles, Lyon routed the show to 72 communities along the East Coast and in the Midwest, winding up with a slew of Southern bookings. Back for a second turn as a marketing director was Lydia Coulter, a former high school homecoming queen from Lake Placid, New York with a journalism degree from University of Florida. In an interview at Tampa’s Eastgate Mall on opening night for a November 16-19 round of performances, Coulter described her assigned duties on the advance:

“Coulter’s the one who comes into town a month before the circus to lay the groundwork – little things, like finding a dentist who doesn’t mind sticking his hand down inside a Bengal tiger... ‘I’m traveling in front of a small army of 150 people; a city that moves from town to town by night.

“These are people living out of their trailers for almost a year. A lot of them live in long, barracks-like sleepers. When they get here, they are counting on me to give them all sorts of information – where are the all-night convenience stores and the local discos and places to get a bite to eat at 2:00 A.M. – those sorts of things.”

The on-site promoter also made contacts within the community, especially with newspapers to seek favorable coverage (the show’s home office staff in Winter Park handled advertising placements) and coordinated the advance clown’s mall and school visits a few days ahead of the engagement.

Based on two seasons of motel living and driving to assigned communities, Coulter confessed to her biases:

“The big cities are very difficult. The circus has to compete with so many things for the media’s attention and there just seems to be a completely different attitude. I mean, you go into a city like Cleveland and you get the ho-hum attitude.

“But in the small towns and villages you are the big event of the year. People actually look forward to the night or weekend when the circus is going to be in town. There is a special electricity in the tent during the shows. The crowds respond so much more.”²³



As indoor malls began sprouting up, the circus embraced the concept of multiple-day stands on shopping center parking lots. The strategy also included a squad of marketing directors for each appearance. Left to right: talent coordinator Wilson Storey, general manager John Pugh, owner Jerry Collins and vice president of marketing, Tim Stinson.

William Woodcock Collection

The Circus Historical Society's journal lauded the expanding role of Beatty-Cole's billing brigade as a contributing factor in attracting crowds to each circus site:

"Perhaps the most pleasing change noted over last season was the rather extensive amount of billing paper that was posted. Half sheet and panel pictorials from *Enquirer* with fully a dozen designs were used, plus dates, window and tack cards. These were placed primarily in windows of service stations and other businesses throughout a radius of ten miles from the exhibition site."²⁴

The responsibility for setting up the canvas city on parking mall lots in towns big and small fell on Johnny Pugh and his crew of workingmen. The placement of tents and vehicles on contracted lots differed from one community to another, but Pugh preferred the paved surfaces of shopping malls:

"Before, we would be sponsored by the Lions Club or the Jaycees and they had to supply the location. And they would say, 'Oh, Frank's got a bit of property at the crossroad,' and that's where we'd be. What a hell of a thing. You're advertising a circus in back of so and so's place.

"Here (at a Boston-area mall on July 28 and 29) they can see you. There's traffic in a mall. In a lot of towns there is an advertising connection between the malls and the newspaper, so when we get to the paper, we already have a foot in the door. Also, we get to buy ads at the same rate as the mall."²⁵

Johnny's "Blue Room Bombers"

The extra days spent at shopping malls also brought opportunities for troupers to relax and enjoy simple past times like baseball. During a multi-day stand in Ohio, a group of performers and cage men aptly named the Blue Room Bombers, featured Johnny Pugh on the mound. Their foes were the Cookhouse Chickens, sponsored by the cook tent, no less, which consisted of any other workers who wanted to pick up a bat and glove. The game's off-lot festivities – with an extra musical component – were witnessed by a reporter:

"It's still four hours until show time and the men of the circus are heading for a nearby baseball diamond...

"As sweat pours off the dusty players and the game continues, the band's tuba player observes, 'This is the real life here. This is what keeps you going. That in there (the big top) is the job.

"It's getting closer to showtime now. The ballgame is over. The Bombers smashed the Chickens 23-13."²⁶

Sells & Gray troupers learned of their fates on July 19 between afternoon and evening performances at Georgetown, Kentucky: the show would close within a week. Not long afterward, on September 8, the King show also folded at Athens, Georgia, and returned to winter quarters to be mothballed.

The surviving Beatty-Cole show, in a departure from



The old Beatty-Cole water truck received a new paint job at winter quarters in early 1980. The circus first used the DeLand property after the 1956 season closed.

Richard Faber photograph, Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

previous tours, played Vero Beach, Florida December 9-10, then laid off for several weeks before returning for a series of under-canvas holiday dates in the Miami area between December 27, 1978 and January 7, 1979. The season's combined tour covered more than 9,500 miles.

In DeLand as the *World's Largest Show under the Big Top* was being framed for the 1979 season, John Pugh found himself unable to gain access to the McClosky household in Winter Park to seek guidance and funding, not only for winter quarters operations but also to carry the massive show until its committed dates. Frank McClosky's health was deteriorating, and Pugh was further isolated by his lack of contact with the show's chief financier, Jerry Collins.

The circus' secretary-treasurer, Edna Antes, was a long-time McClosky loyalist and looked after the show's expenses

in DeLand. "She was in the office in winter quarters, and any money we were getting came through her." Pugh recalled carrying a wrapped packet to Mrs. Antes in her trailer. I said, "Edna, do you want this?" She said, 'Oh my god, I forgot all about that.' It was packed with money. They used to mail it down (to McClosky's home in Winter Park). And it wasn't even sent special delivery. Can you believe it?"²⁷

Though Edna Antes and Johnny often shared morning coffee together at her on-site trailer, Pugh said the secretary-treasurer and other show executives kept him at arms-length whenever the chairman of the holding company paid a rare visit to winter quarters. "They always used to route me around Jerry Collins. They'd say, 'Go downtown and enjoy a movie.'"²⁸

"I never talked to Frank McClosky after he got sick," Pugh said, recalling a series of bizarre incidents that threatened not only the survival of off-season operations but also the opening of the 1979 tour. "Here I was in charge of winter quarters, with no money" to feed the crew and animals.²⁹

The GM's relations with his tight-fisted superior had been tenuous, even in the best of times, but especially in the off-season. "I collected my \$37 unemployment when I worked for Frank at winter quarters. He used to say to me, 'You can spend more money than anybody I ever saw.' And I wasn't spending the money on me," Pugh chuckled.³⁰

Pugh said he was repeatedly rebuffed when he visited his boss' home to plead for desperately needed financial relief. "Even though I had been close to the McClosky family, I never got past the front door."

"I kept the show alive that winter. I was getting the guys to get food stamps, and I had everybody go down and get their unemployment. There was an egg farm down the road from us, and the (owner) would give me cracked eggs so that I could feed the crew. I also was having the guys get in line at a church where they could get canned goods."³¹

Pugh said Mrs. Antes was "shocked" by the near-primitive conditions and advised John to contact Richard McGarrity, legal advisor to McClosky. (McGarrity had been executive vice president of the holding company in the early 1960s and was listed as an "insurance consultant" in a following year's program.)

"I said, 'We need money to pay the light bill and the water bill and to get the show out,' and Mr. McGarrity said,

'Why don't you ask for the money from Jerry Collins?'"³²

Mrs. Antes agreed to Pugh's contacting the racetrack owner, but cautioned, "Don't tell Jerry Collins anything."³³

Collins to the rescue - again

"I didn't know how to get ahold of Mr. Collins, but I called one of his dog tracks and said, 'Mr. Collins, this is John Pugh. I actually work for you.' He said, 'Why don't you come down to my racetrack and have dinner tonight?' And I said to him, 'Where is your racetrack?'"



Skilled winter quarters employees such as Charlie Harris performed essential work prior to the 1980 tour.

James Cole photograph

After being briefed on dire conditions at the DeLand facility, Collins asked Pugh to return the next day, at which time the financier handed Pugh a letter drafted by the owner's attorney, which listed the names of about ten key people on the show.

"It basically said that due to the fact that Frank McClosky was incapable of managing the show anymore, the following people agree to work for Jerry Collins and answer only to Jerry Collins. He gave me that and said, 'Now get everybody to sign it.' My name was at the top, and I got everybody to sign it.

"The only person I didn't sign that day was Edna Antes...She was in tears. And I said, 'Edna, if this doesn't go, Jerry will close the show and get an attorney and get the I.R.S. into the show. You're the one who handles the money, and they'll let you take the whole thing'...I finally got Edna's signature."³⁴

Having secured in writing the loyalty of his managers, Collins became acting president and took control of the circus on March 2. According to *Bandwagon*:

"[Collins] gave the decision to get Beatty-Cole ready for the road and to shelve King Bros. and Sells & Gray. Several key personnel who had served on the smaller shows were absorbed by Beatty-Cole and a number of vehicles which had transported King and Sells & Gray were used to replace older trucks on the single show going out from the DeLand quarters in 1979. The four elephants, two on each of the smaller shows, were used to enlarge the Beatty-Cole herd to a total of 13. Both King Bros. and Sells & Gray were then offered for sale but neither had been disposed of before the end of the year."³⁵

The Orlando Sentinel, which frequently tracked the show's operations, praised Collins' efforts:

"For the second time in his colorful career, Jerry Collins has snatched the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus from the jaws of disaster.

"When it appeared that the circus was stymied, Collins wouldn't let it die...He pumped money into the show for new equipment and hired new acts. Although he would not reveal the precise amount, Collins said the infusion was in the "six figures" category.

"While Collins will remain in Orlando for the remainder of the greyhound racing season, he will be in daily contact with general manager John Pugh and secretary-treasurer Edna Antes concerning the operations.

"Just as in the 1950s, Collins feels it will take about two years to restore the circus to profitability...But profitability isn't the only thing Collins has on his mind. "I don't need the money," said the multimillionaire Collins. "I just don't want a failure."³⁶

Quoted in the May 26 *Amusement Business*, the relieved general manager flatly declared: "Were it not for the financial support of Mr. Collins our show would have never left winter quarters."

Even before the fleet pulled out of its home base, the show's dozen advance team members were already boosting the circus and its performers during one-month stays in assigned communities. Among them was the future Beatty-Cole marketing VP, Bruce Pratt. He was then a 28-year-old Miami University graduate who had worked in advertising for a Middletown, Ohio, newspaper before joining Beatty-Cole for the initial mall tour in 1977. Pratt said he tried to convince skeptical newspaper reporters along the route on the notion that "we're trying to get away from the image of the promoter, the stereotype of the guy with a cigar in his mouth."³⁷

The 1979 season opened for a two-day stand March 12 in Gainesville, Florida. The circus program listed Pugh and Tim Stinson as co-producers. McClosky's name was omitted. Trevor Bale returned as ringmaster, and Dave Hoover's



"Jimmy James" Plot joined Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. as a clown in 1966, and in 1978 he became ringmaster. His booming baritone announcements were heard on the show for more than 25 years.

James Cole photograph

big cat act kicked off the two-hour performance. Later in the performance, Freddie Logan and his family fielded a herd of 13 elephants.

At mid-season, ill health forced Bale to step down as show announcer. He was succeeded by boss clown Jimmy James, who would blow the whistle and regale Beatty-Cole audiences with his deep, thundering voice for the next two-and-a-half decades.

Equestrian acts, which had been dropped when the show adopted the mall lot format, were back in a big way, featuring the Bale family. Bonnie Bale-Seidon recalled their return to the show's roster:

"In 1969... We did the three rings of horses with carriages on each side, and the horse in the middle that my dad [Trevor Bale] rode. He announced, and I did my cloud swing. In the middle of the year, he got sick, so he went into the hospital, and my sister Nita [Dawnita], who was home at the time, flew up and took over the act in the middle."³⁸

McClosky dies and Collins becomes sole owner

From its opening in the Sunshine State, Beatty-Cole tackled 1979 dates in the Deep South and Midwest before venturing as far north as Providence, Rhode Island. Troupers played familiar stands along the Atlantic Seaboard before completing a 9,100-mile route in 80 cities with a two-day, four-performance series in Tampa November 12.

Just four days earlier, while playing before circus-friendly audiences in Sarasota, the Beatty-Cole troupe learned of the death of Frank McClosky at his Winter Park home on November 8. He was 68. McClosky, born Francis Miecznikowski, had guided the show since he, Jerry Collins, Walter Kernan and Randolph Calhoun had resurrected a broken Clyde Beatty Circus in 1956 and nursed the show back into profitability.

As the sole remaining partner, Collins moved quickly to consolidate his holdings. Pugh recalled Collins' next steps: "He made a deal with Brenda [McClosky's widow]. She had no interest in the circus. He took over the whole nine yards, Jerry Collins did."³⁹

"Brenda sold him the show for \$250,000 – Frank's share. I mean, this is all hearsay. I wasn't in the meetings. Jerry came back down, and he said, 'We're going to take the show out next year and we're going to play some buildings with it.'"⁴⁰

The new sole proprietor promoted Pugh to vice president. But, Pugh said, "I never had a key to that office [wagon] until Jerry Collins came on." The circus' finances remained beyond his reach.⁴¹

Addressing concerns that the circus might close because of McClosky's passing, Bonnie Bale recalled: "I don't know if everyone on the show was worried about the show not going out. I think that everybody knew that Johnny would somehow take it over anyway."⁴²

The 1980 season would take Beatty-Cole to 85 cities and towns in 18 states east of the Mississippi River, with total mileage increasing slightly to 10,400. Though Collins had

already committed to both outdoor and arena dates, ex-Ringling promoter Tim Stinson continued to press for more indoor venues. "It gives us a longer season to offer to performers and it cuts down on our winter quarters expenses," [Stinson] said."⁴³

Surprisingly, the big top traditionalist, John Pugh, who had been elevated to vice president-operations during the off-season, was not opposed to having a steel roof over the performance. "Yeah, I liked the buildings because it was an easier move to get in the buildings. You didn't have the weather to worry about. You didn't have to worry about setting up the seats," he recalled years later.⁴⁴

In a newspaper interview just days before the two-day season opener on March 15-16 in DeLand, Collins said he opted in for the separate winter tour "when it becomes too



Dave Hoover had been presenting the Beatty-Cole wild animal act for 15 years when the short-lived indoor tour opened in Fort Myers, Florida, October 23, 1980.

James Cole photograph

cold to play outdoors." At the same time, the owner also pointed to his longtime devotion to the show's roots.

"Although gasoline shortages and other strange turns of the economy have brought about many changes for Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus in recent years, the circus will not abandon the tented format...We don't intend giving up something as profitable as our tented season [Collins said]. This past season was our most profitable year since 1962."⁴⁵

Stinson and Pugh were both on the same page when it came to the strategy for booking the show. "It just makes sense to play larger towns and stay longer,"⁴⁶ said Stinson,

who had been promoted to vice president-marketing late in the previous season. So it was that nary a one-day stand was on the 1980 route, and all were under canvas through late September.

During the show's series of spring dates in the Philadelphia area, Stinson told a reporter that because of the mall format and stays of two, three and four days, circus revenues were up by 25 to 35 percent over the previous year. "We take advantage of the market research that tells developers where to put the malls," said Stinson... And, he pointed out, the circus in turn brings business to the stores."⁴⁷

Pugh also credited multi-day engagements for the gains:

"Television hurt the circus, Pugh said, but the circus was hurting itself. One-day appearances in towns were robbing the circus of customers and creating too-costly travel expenses, he said.

"The world was speeding into the 21st century while the circus continued operating with a 100-year-old format. It became a question of survival, he said."⁴⁸

The tented portion of the 1980 tour ended with a two-day stint in Lake City, Florida September 27-28. The circus then returned to winter quarters, where preparations were well under way to implement the building plan in a dozen cities in the final quarter and early 1981.

Indoor show debuts

A separate "arena division" was formed under the parent company's Kit Circus Corporation, which had operated the King Bros. and Sells & Gray shows. And owner Collins had named Tom Scallan, an executive with extensive experience producing indoor ice shows, as president of the newly constituted unit. Stinson would shift his emphasis to promote the Beatty-Cole indoor rendition as "World's Largest Circus of Thrills".

Original plans called for a 16-week tour divided into two segments, the first playing arenas from October 22 to December 7, then, following a two-week layover in DeLand, resuming on December 27 and extending into January.

With few exceptions, the same performers from the shopping mall dates would entertain circusgoers under arena roofs.

Falling back on his experience as a rigger on a British circus in the late 1950s and on overseeing operations at the Commack arena for Beatty-Cole, Pugh trimmed the size of the circus. "I was in charge of getting all the equipment ready."⁴⁹

Only 15 show-owned vehicles were required, an obvious savings in expenses from the 30-something cabs and trailers needed for the under-canvas tour. "I liked the arenas," Pugh said, "because it was an easier move to get in the buildings. We left all the seating back at home."⁵⁰ However, he added that the indoor show still required 120 to 140 personnel including performers, workers, promoters and home office staff.

Following an initial shakedown stand in Fort Myers, Florida on October 23-24, the troupe moved to arenas in Pittsburg; Cincinnati; Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky; Dayton and Columbus, Ohio; Wheeling and Huntington, West Virginia; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Cracks in the tour plans appeared early on. For starters, arena managers in the various locales were familiar with Ringling Bros. operations but not with the new Beatty-Cole indoor edition. "We had Tom Scallan booking the dates for us, but he didn't negotiate with the buildings. He just booked the arenas and not the concession rights," Pugh claimed. "I had to go to the guy that had the concessions in the building and negotiate about the items that we could sell, and he had me over a barrel." In addition, Pugh claimed that at sev-



Canadian Freddie Logan joined the Ringling elephant department in 1946. He and his wife Ora Jo were fan favorites for several decades and trouped with Beatty-Cole for 25 years.

James Cole photograph

eral venues he also had to arrange for on-site parking for the show's vehicle and troupers' trailers.⁵¹

Pugh said that any anticipated savings in expenses at arena sites quickly evaporated. "The charges we got in the buildings were unbelievable," Pugh said. "We had to hire the help at union prices. We had to hire electricians. We had to hire the ushers. And moving the show in and out of the building, we had to have a crew that belonged to the building."⁵²

Circus crowds, reviews varied widely

Beatty-Cole publicists scored favorable hits in Cincinnati with feature articles on Dave Hoover, who was a former circulation manager for the *Cincinnati Post* in nearby Middletown, and a photo of stilt walker Barrie Sloan and Walter Logan (Freddie's son) posing with three elephants. The newspaper's entertainment critic, however, minced no words in his review:

"The Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus, which opened Wednesday night [November 5] at the Cincinnati Gardens, looks awfully threadbare as a production but it comes with at least a few acceptable acts... The opening parade is so spare it suggests half the company has remained backstage for a coffee break... It's the kind of circus that definitely looks better under a big top where it could have some atmosphere instead of a cavernous, bland arena like the Gardens..."⁵³

The managing editor of a Lexington, Kentucky publication was ambivalent about his perceptions of a Beatty-Cole performance on the University of Kentucky campus:

"I liked the whole Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus Tuesday night [November 11]... Opening night finds Rupp Arena three-quarters empty. There are reasons for this. For a family of four an evening at the circus costs \$20 or more. It's easier to stay home. The thrills are cheaper on TV..."

"In the arena aisles, vendors scrambled, with a telltale hint of desperation, for dollars. But with all those circus people, those 25 tons of elephant and all that equipment and work, it doesn't seem a profit could be turned. There was a whiff of poverty in the air..."

"I hope the show goes on."⁵⁴

John Pugh echoed the adverse economic impact on the indoor show during a newspaper interview on the final day of a two-day stand in Dayton, Ohio [November 18-19].

"[Pugh] said that because of the economy, his circus hasn't been able to raise prices in the past two years. Attendance has been down... the circus is having to spend more on promotion and adver-

tising, and it is reluctantly passing up some of the more economically depressed areas."⁵⁵

Even though arenas for the second half had already been booked, Collins pulled the plug on the indoor tour. Following the Winston-Salem stand in early December, the show returned to winter quarters for a two-week layover, as originally planned. The schedule called for Beatty-Cole to go back out for a post-Christmas stand (December 26-31) at the state fair arena in Oklahoma City and to complete the indoor route in early 1981.

Even before the show returned to its home base to DeLand, rumors once again were swirling of Beatty-Cole closing for good.

The fate of the 1981 tour rested on Collins conferring with his two lieutenants. "Jerry said, 'What do you guys want to do? Do you want to go into buildings or stay (under canvas)? I'll promote it and put money into it either way.' And I convinced Jerry that we should take it out under canvas," Pugh recalled.⁵⁶

The owner's decision was confirmed in an early 1981 posting in *The Circus Report*:

"Jerry Collins... has announced the opening of the 1981 season for the World's Largest Circus under the Big Top... on March 15th at DeLand, Fla. The 1981 season will run for 40 weeks, with most engagements at regional shopping malls, a venture that has proved successful in the past..."

"This past winter, Collins purchased the entire Pan American Circus of Puerto Rico from Jimmy Harrington, a San Juan impresario. Included in the new equipment will be 12 highly efficient quartz light towers for the rings, spotlights, new ring curbs, a solid-state sound system with mixing console, and a European-style performer's entrance."⁵⁷

Edna Antes was no longer listed as the corporation's secretary-treasurer in the 1981 program. Wilson Storey, the show's talent agent, assumed additional responsibilities as office manager and treasurer. Returning staff members included side show manager Jim Windland and band director Russ Darr.

To the average circusgoer, Beatty Cole's 1981 outward appearance and performance were similar to years past. To the more discerning circus follower, however, the gigantic show was clearly showing its age. In addition, financial mis-cues from the previous season carried over to the new one, as *Bandwagon* noted:

"For the second year, Beatty-Cole used its traditional four-pole bale ring tent. This point was noted as the circus frequently purchased a new tent every year. The tent measures out to be a large 140-foot round with three 48-foot middle pieces. The side show tent, also in its second season, is a 60 foot

round with three 30 foot middle pieces.

"According to sources, the 1981 season was not a profitable one. Much of the profit from the New England tour was used to settle the legal suits brought against the show for cancelling building dates and advertising from the second half of the aborted winter tour. The Texas part of the tour was not as profitable as it had been in previous years."⁵⁸

In 1981 the circus visited 109 communities in 19 states, considerably more than the 86 towns on the 1980 route. Beatty-Cole entered Texas at Mount Pleasant on September 12 and exited at Orange on October 22, a total of 18 dates in the Lone Star State. When the season ended at Naples, Florida on November 27, the circus vehicles had registered just over 11,000 miles, a longer route yet again over the previous year.

On December 4, the circus placed an ad in *The Wall Street Journal* seeking bidders for the entire Beatty-Cole Circus. Less than a week later, an AP missive declared that "John Pugh has confirmed the sale. A skeleton crew of 40 is taking care of the animals and equipment in DeLand until the circus is sold."⁵⁹

Pugh said the owner's family was pressing the 74-year-old Collins to rid himself of stress involved in overseeing finances and making policy decisions for the traveling enterprise.⁶⁰

From mid-to-late December, the news media was flooded with additional information. An initial report in *The Orlando Sentinel's* December 17 edition revealed Collin's motivation and rationale behind the hoped-for transaction.

"I've got \$100 million (worth of) business in two racetracks," he said. "I'm trying to eliminate all those other things. I don't want the responsibility of moving several hundred people a day anymore..."

"The (circus) property, the equipment, it's worth at least \$3 million. I'm going to sell it for less than that..."⁶¹

Carson & Barnes Circus owner Dorey Miller inspected the Beatty-Cole properties and reportedly made an offer to buy the outfit. It was rejected. But Miller would later come to Pugh's aid to help his friendly rival keep the massive circus afloat. Collins reported he had several other offers, yet for

all intents and purposes, it appeared that Beatty-Cole would join the other two Acme Circus Corp. outfits in the circus graveyard.

Behind the scenes, however, Collins had been taking a separate approach toward selling his circus. Following the unprofitable 1980 tour, the owner called Pugh and Stinson to his office. "He made us an offer. If we could sell the show, he'd give 25 percent to which one of us sold the show," Pugh



John Herriott and his high-school horse Apache Bandolero at the Fort Myers opening of the brief 1980 indoor season. Herriott and his family were fixtures on the program for many seasons.

James Cole photograph

said. "So, Tim and I put an ad in the [*The Wall Street Journal*] to see if we could get an investor. But it didn't work."⁶²

That's when Johnny turned his attention to another potential buyer: Ringling Bros.

"I actually went to Irvin Feld, and I said, 'Why don't you buy the show?' But that was the time when they were buying the show back [from Mattel] and money was tight. But Mr. Feld said, 'Why don't you come to work for me?'"⁶³

For a second time in just over a decade, Pugh declined Feld's offer. Meanwhile, Tim Stinson dropped out of the competition for the potential half-million-dollar finder's fee, leaving Pugh alone to pursue the prize. A quirky series of events led to John being the eventual proprietor of Beatty-Cole. Approaching negotiations would seriously test the tenuous working relationship – and trust – between Pugh and the crafty Sarasota mogul.

A lunch meeting with Sarasota accountant and Collins' tax advisor, John Mercurio, was the genesis of the arduous path to Pugh's takeover.

"[Mercurio] told me, 'Jerry shouldn't even think about getting rid of this show. He paid about a million and a half to two million dollars in personal income tax. Personal. Nothing to do with the racetracks.' He said, 'Owning the whole show, we could actually put that money into the show every year and make it a great show.' And I said, 'Oh yeah?'"

Subsequently, Pugh gained an insight to Collins' philanthropy.

"We were walking by a hotel in Sarasota, and he said, 'Do you see that hotel there? I donated it to New College. In those days it was worth \$800,000. And those suns-of-guns sold that thing two weeks later for \$500,000. It cost me my tax write-off.'"

"And what happened is I got an idea. I went back to Jerry and said, 'Mr. Collins, why don't you donate the circus [to New College], and then you can take a two-million-dollar write-off?' Collins said, 'I'm not going to do that. You know what happened the last time.'"

"About two days later he called me up and said, 'Be at the airport tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock. Make sure you're wearing a jacket and tie.' We got on the plane and flew up to Tallahassee. And on the way up, he said to me, 'I want you to make a presentation to (the Florida State University Foundation) about donating the circus to them.' The head of donations was Hal Wilkins. I made the presentation, and they were really impressed with it. And I sold them on the fact that they had the Flying High Circus, and this would be a natural for them. I said, 'You can have this and maybe some of your performers during the summer can actually work on the real circus.'"

"Jerry was real excited about this; he was going to be able to write two million off his taxes. But he had to do this before the end of 1981 because the tax law was going to change on the 31st, but then [the deal] hit a snag. It had to be put out [publicly] because of the Sunshine Laws in Florida.

"Then Hal rang me up one night and asked, 'How would you like to buy the circus?' I said, 'Mr. Wilkins, I don't have that kind of money.' He said, 'We'll make you a deal you can't refuse.' I said, 'Let's think about it.' So, they came back with a deal."

The Foundation proposed to sell Pugh the circus for \$2 million, with a 20-year payout. The annual installment of \$100,000 was due at the end of each season.

"At that time, I hadn't seen the books. I was in operations. I didn't know anything about the finances. But I figured if you can't come up with that kind of money every year, then you shouldn't be in business.⁶⁴ What the hell do I have to lose? I could get the show out and if it blows, I could just give it

back to FSU.⁶⁵

"So, we did it [the deal], and at the last minute we went down to Tampa, to the Foundation lawyer's office.

"Hal Wilkins breaks the news to Jerry, that they were going to sell the circus to me. And, for some reason, after everything I had done for him, Jerry just blew up and didn't want any part of it. So, Hal Wilkins and the FSU crowd left."⁶⁶ Collins, Pugh and the lawyer remained."

With time running out, the attorney pointed out that in order for the agreement to be sealed, Collins would have to sign it, and the papers would have to be postmarked by midnight at the only post office open that late – the Tampa airport.

Although the owner continued to oppose the deal, Pugh recalled a sudden turn of events. "By the time we got to the ground floor in the elevator, I talked Jerry into signing the papers. And we went back up, and there's nobody there, so we had to get the cleaning lady and one of the security men to witness Jerry's signature."

The pair drove to Collins' office, where they awaited further developments. Wilkins hastily arranged a telephone conference meeting with the Foundation's board of directors. Both Collins and Pugh were included in the impromptu official business session. "And Hal says, 'I've got enough people together for a quorum, so this deal will go through.' And he said to me, 'John, if you back out of this thing now, I'm going to come looking for you with a gun.' And Jerry says, 'You'll have to stand in line, Hal.' So, we put it together."

Pugh returned to DeLand and accompanied his spouse, Brigitte, to a New Year's party at a next-door neighbor's house. "About a quarter of twelve, Jerry rang me up and said, 'Congratulations, you're a circus owner.'"⁶⁷

Whatever conviviality remained between the two over the agreement vanished when Pugh approached his former boss to collect the 25 percent finder's fee.

Enter Doug Holwadel

"About a week after the holidays I went to see Mr. Collins, and I said, 'Mr. Collins, do you think I could get a little advance on my money?' He says, 'You don't need the money, John. You're now a big show owner.' I'm relying on getting that 25 percent, and he stiffed me for the half million dollars. And that's how I ended up with Doug Holwadel as a partner. I mean, I just didn't have the money to get the show out."⁶⁸

Pugh recalled seeing Holwadel visiting the show as early as 1969, apparently thinking about buying into Beatty-Cole. "But he didn't have the financing at the time."⁶⁹

In addition to being an avid circus enthusiast, E. Douglas Holwadel was an officer of a Columbia, South Carolina,



In 1982 John Pugh and Doug Holwadel purchased Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. from Florida State University. Frank McClosky's nephew Ned Toth also rejoined the show that season as vice president of marketing. Left to right: John and Brigitte Pugh, Doug Holwadel, Jutta and Ned Toth.

James Cole photograph

cement company. Holwadel headed a small group of investors that included his brother, Kent F. Holwadel, vice president of an investment firm in Cincinnati, and a Cincinnati attorney.

Pugh became president and board chairman of the newly formed Cole Bros. Circus, Inc. As an equal partner, Holwadel was named the show's vice president. Pugh said his counterpart fronted \$283,000 to enable the circus to launch its 1982 tour under dual ownership. "He borrowed the money from relatives."⁷⁰

To the relief of anxious Beatty-Cole troupers, the tentative deal to transfer ownership as a donation from Collins to Florida State was announced on January 4, 1982:

"Circus assets – which include equipment, animals and 38 acres of land near DeLand – are estimated at \$2.5 million, making it the largest private donation in the university's history...

"[Hal] Wilkins and other FSU officials are currently negotiating to

sell its operation to a corporation headed by John W. Pugh, circus manager...

"We'll take back a note for the assets of the circus. We want to make clear we're not going to be operating the circus," said Wilkins."⁷¹

During early negotiations, Holwadel threw a wrench into the deal. According to Pugh, his new partner told FSU that "we don't need your winter quarters. I'm getting ready to move (the circus) to South Carolina. That's where he lived, and his family was up there." The proposed move did not materialize. Later in the 1982 season, "Doug told me, 'I can't [relocate the circus winter quarters] up there on a piece of land that I thought belonged to the cement company.'"

In the meantime, FSU retained ownership of the DeLand property (reportedly valued at \$500,000) and allowed the circus to continue using it. Pugh said he personally purchased the winter quarters later that year from the university.⁷²

The final transaction was inked February 1, revealing Holwadel as Pugh's new partner. A story in *The Circus Report* contained a few surprises, among them, "Ned Toth has been appointed vice president of marketing."⁷³



A breath-taking hillside vista of the circus at Viewmont Mall in Scranton, Pennsylvania in July 1982.

James Cole photograph

“He needed a job,” Pugh said of his brother-in-law’s returning to the show after previously being fired twice, the first by Toth’s late father-in-law, Frank McClosky, and the second by Pugh. In his new position, “I should have never got him back.”⁷⁴

Massive cuts, higher prices

Missing from the circus midway was a fixture of many decades: the side show. “When Holwadel came on, we decided that it didn’t pay for itself,” Pugh explained.⁷⁵

To ensure that the circus would be able to tackle its 1982 route required further and deeper cuts in expenses, as well as increased ticket prices.

“Four or five trucks were cut from the show, bringing the number to around twenty-five. The big top first used in 1981 was still utilized... Two seat wagons were cut from the show, reducing the seating to around 3,500. An elephant truck was also cut, leaving the show with eight bulls carried in two trucks. The goal was to cut out \$1,000 a day from the nut... Admission prices went up 50 cents to \$6.00 for general admission and \$3.50 for children.”⁷⁶

The performance remained virtually untouched, and the six-piece band remained under Russ Darr’s leadership.

The 1982 edition was experiencing anything but an array of rose petals scattered before a conquering Caesar’s army. Some of the pitfalls along the route were detailed in a media report as Beatty-Cole was completing a two-day stand at Allentown, Pennsylvania July 31-August 1:

“The season has enjoyed only limited financial success... One reason, of course, is the economy... But the other reason is bad luck.

“Beatty was touring Connecticut in June when the state was pummeled by heavy rains and floods. A few weeks before that found the circus in New England seaside communities, but soaring temperatures sent people flocking to the beach instead of to the airless big top. Early in the spring, the show toured a string of Southern textile towns still reeling from the shock of massive mill closings and massive layoffs.

“But not all is gloom. July has seen numerous box office sellouts... That makes Johnny Pugh ecstatic...”⁷⁷

At the end of the 1982 route, which was shortened to just over 8,100 miles, Pugh candidly spoke to a Fort Myers reporter. “If I could have sold it to anybody else, I would have been a lot better off,” Pugh said... “The circus has not had a profitable season in seven years... If we broke even, I’d think we were performing a miracle.”⁷⁸

Even with packed houses in Baton Rouge (October 8-10) and an added performance at New Orleans (October 15-18), Beatty-Cole’s bottom line for the season was less than stellar, Pugh reminisced. “The first year out, we managed to pay off \$600,000 in debt that we inherited [from previous circus seasons]. But basically, we came in probably with \$35,000 in the till. And, you know, we’re not going to survive the winter like that.”⁷⁹



The promise of a new season was captured on opening day in 1982.

John Goodall photograph, Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

“Let’s just say we got ourselves out of a hole,” Pugh recalled years later. “We basically sold everything that was in winter quarters that wasn’t hanging down – anything that didn’t move [or] that we didn’t use – I sold it in order to get the show out the next year.”⁸⁰

Acknowledgements

Once again, the author appreciates Johnny Pugh’s candor about his half-century career on Beatty-Cole, and he expresses thanks to Bonnie Bale Seldon. Additionally, Chris Berry, Jerry Cash, James Cole, Pete Shrake and Tim Tegge assisted with obtaining images for the article. **BW**

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Dutch Treat:

The Fanciful Footwork of Miss Loni

Part III

by Timothy Noel Tegge with images from the Tegge Archives

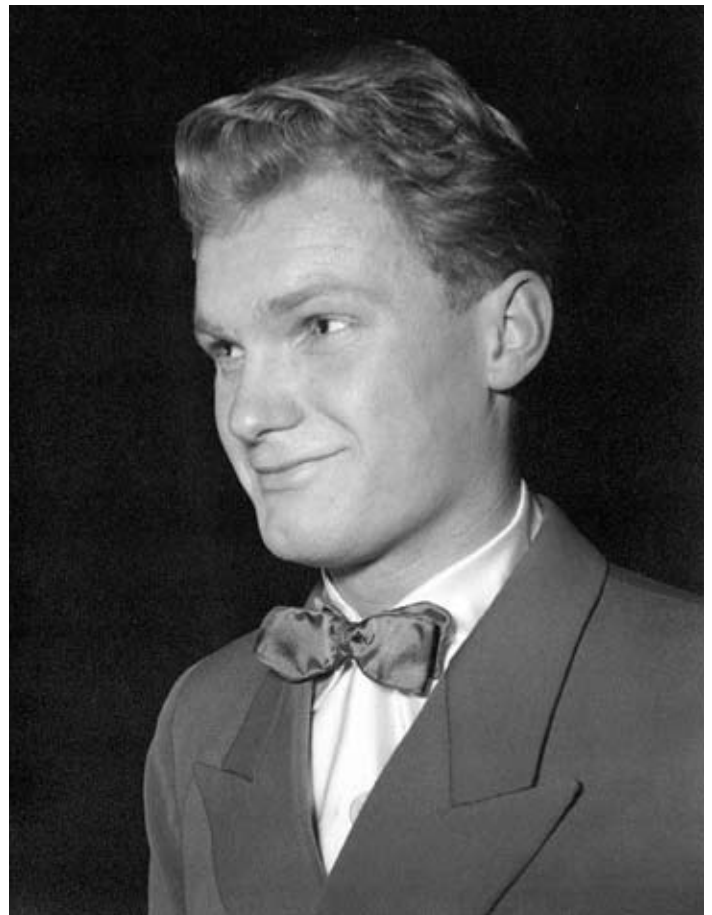


Miss Loni photographed by Maurice Seymour, c.1960.

News traveled quickly across the Atlantic, even in 1958, before the dawn of international direct dialing. And the news was devastating. At the age of just 25, Loni's brother Janny was dead. En route to a fishing trip with a friend, his automobile, a Volkswagen "Beetle", had collided at full speed with a passenger train near Zutphen, Netherlands, dragging the car approximately 500 feet before it careened into a ditch. An unattributed newspaper clipping (paraphrased from the original, in Dutch) showing a picture of the mangled remains described the scene:

"This was left of the Volkswagen that was grabbed by a train at Warlen near Zutphen on

Wednesday afternoon. The train dragged the car 150 meters. Mr. R. Abeen from Apeldoorn, who was at the wheel, was thrown out. The second passenger, also from Apeldoorn, Mr. J. B. Westendorp, became trapped in the wreckage. Both men must have been killed instantly. The driver of the train saw the car drive slowly towards the level crossing. Therefore, he gave [a] repeated and loud signal. The residents of the farms in the area heard this clearly. However, it appears that in the car neither the train nor the continuous signals had been noticed..."¹



Loni's only sibling, Janny Roelf Abeen, c.1957. This portrait was taken about a year before his tragic accident.

Loni said that the police showed up at her parents' door to deliver the distressing news and eventually, when he could compose himself to finally do so, her father placed an international call stateside. "It was the worst thing that ever happened to me," she remarked. "As often as I've tried to put it out of my head, I can still hear those words every now and then..."² Dropping everything, she and Freddie abruptly caught the next available flight to the Netherlands to be with family and friends for the memorial service and burial. The wake was held in Apeldoorn, where the family resided, and the funeral took place on Saturday morning, January 18, in the parish church of Our Lady of Assumption, Main Street in Apeldoorn, with burial at the R. K. Cemetery de Dordrecht at 2:30 P.M.³

Loni was heartbroken at the loss of her only sibling. There was another brother, also named Roelf, who was born to her parents in 1928, when Loni was about two years old, but he was sickly throughout his short lifespan and died in 1932, at the age of four. She really wasn't old enough to grasp that event and hardly remembered much about him – just that he suddenly "went away" and never returned. But when Janny came along that following year, Loni was seven years old and quickly assumed the role of the adoring "big sister". As they grew, they became almost inseparable. A cache of family snapshots reveals mischievous glints between brother and sister as their years progressed into adulthood. Suddenly, all of this had been taken away from her. She was crushed.

Decades after his passing, Loni often spoke about Janny, and with great devotion. Due to the circumstances surrounding her brother's death, she found it extremely difficult to ever again watch DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth*, for obvious reasons. The train wreck scene always left a knot in her stomach. "I just wish I could have seen him one last time..."⁴

The Abeen household was shattered into pieces emotionally, physically and spiritually as well. Loni herself was in a difficult situation, having to leave her broken family behind to honor extensive bookings awaiting her return to the United States. The cliché was then, as it remains to this day, very true: "The show must go on".

Show people are extraordinarily resilient, and it is purely the show business ethic that encourages them to carry on regardless of any loss or catastrophe. Their best therapy in times of extreme trauma and depression comes from doing what they believe in and do best: perform. Knowing well that the weeks and months that lay ahead would be difficult on so many different levels for the Abeen family, Loni and Freddie half-heartedly returned to the States in preparation for her January 31 start at Chicago's Chez Paree.

Once back in America, Loni and Freddie kept themselves totally immersed in chores leading up to her opening with the Gordon MacRae show. Although the reality of what had happened could not be forgotten, the hustle and bustle of rehearsing and beginning another nightclub run demanded her complete concentration. When the lights



Freddie (far left) and Loni (far right) hobnob with famous pianist and showman Liberace at the exclusive Key Club in Chicago's Chez Paree, February 1958. The other woman seated at the table is unidentified.

picked up Miss Loni on stage on that cold Chicago January evening, the audience would never have guessed what she had been through less than two weeks prior. Since the Chez Paree was nationally known as a fashionable hot spot, it was always welcoming special guests and celebrities through the doors of its private reception room "The Key Club". During her two-week engagement (which was extended for an additional three days⁵), piano virtuoso Liberace paid an unexpected visit. He was so taken by Loni's performance that he asked her and Freddie to join him at his table afterwards, where they capered into the late-night hours. Three days after closing in Chicago, Loni went on a tour of one-night stands with the popular Ray Anthony Orchestra as a featured act, playing in stylish hotel showrooms throughout the Midwest. Freddie spent the evenings assisting Loni on stage and during the day was conducting business as usual, soliciting his wife's foot juggling act to agents and producers worldwide, piecing together another notable itinerary. Their original plan was to spend the first half of 1958 working across the United States and then head abroad for the second portion of the season. But they kept in close touch with Loni's parents in Europe, and it soon became obvious that things were not going well for her mother and father.

Barbara Abeen remained completely distraught following Janny's passing. The stress and heartbreak had taken its toll on Loni's mother, and she eventually suffered a "nervous breakdown" in the aftermath of her son's tragic death. It inevitably tore apart any relationship left between her parents, as well. Loni often admitted that her mother and father tolerated each other at best in their later years. With Loni now being very successful and out on her own, Janny was the single thread that seemed to keep the couple together and provide any optimism for the future of the family business. His passing not only extinguished a promising relationship between him and his fiancée, Tini, but also put an unexpected end to the Abeen traveling enterprise founded by his Gladiator-showman father, Roelf, so many years earlier. Realizing the predicament at hand, Freddie and Loni hastily contacted several European agencies about returning overseas shortly following her tour with Ray Anthony, where they could keep an eye on her folks in between any bookings that might be expedited. By the third week of March, the Van Voordens were once again back in Holland.⁶

Faithful Albert Tavel once again focused his primary attention on arranging a series of engagements that would keep Loni and Freddie immersed but still allow intermittent opportunities to check in on Loni's parents back in Apeldoorn. The bookings started off at Scandinavia's fabled Liseberg Amusement Park, in Gothenburg, from May 14-31. There would be only one day off between closing in Sweden and opening in Helsinki on June 2, where Loni would next perform at Linnanmäki Park until the 29th. Then, on July 1, she and Freddie would begin a ten-day run at the Casino Oslo. There were a few weeks open following the run in Nor-

way, at which time they returned to Holland, where the situation with Loni's mother and father was continuing to spiral downward. Loni never really expounded on the matter, but Roelf and Barbara Abeen separated shortly thereafter.⁷



Great with child, but not yet terribly noticeable to the audience, a five-month-plus pregnant Loni kicks up her four-pointed cross in the ring of France's acclaimed Cirque Napoleon Rancy in the fall of 1958.

Loni and Freddie next traveled to France for nearly eleven consecutive weeks, beginning on August 30 in the city of Lille. They would spend 20 days there with Le Cirque Napoleon Rancy, one of three engagements spread over the next two months with this long-established show. From there Loni returned for one week to the Casino Charbonnieres-les-Bains where she appeared with great success on two different occasions in 1955. Then back to the circus ring of Napoleon Rancy, first in Le Havre, from October 11 through 19, and finally in Rouen, from October 24 to November 13.⁸

All the while, numerous proposals for Miss Loni's specialty were pouring in from theaters, casinos, and night clubs across the continents. Two weeks here, one month there – even from Germany's prestigious Circus Krone, which was planning an extensive tour in Holland for 1959. One offer in particular immediately caught her attention upon its ar-

rival: an enticing full season back in the United States with the Polack Bros. Circus, which had become the nation's largest producer of Shrine Circuses. The ten-month route would commence on January 18, 1959 in Flint, Michigan and close in Charleston, West Virginia on November 22.⁹ Freddie had apparently begun negotiating with the circus producer during Loni's stand at the Chez Paree. Based on existing correspondence between Nellie Vaughn, who was talent coordinator for the show,¹⁰ and the Van Voordens, a firm deal had finally been agreed upon and was awaiting contractual signatures when an unexpected twist of fate suddenly presented itself to both parties.

A telegram dated October 25, 1958, sent from France to Nellie Vaughn, 203 N. Wabash, Chicago, Illinois, read "Cannot accept POLACK 1959 because pregnant. Letter to follow – Loni."¹¹

Great with child, Loni continued spinning her ball and kicking around her cylinder through the month of November in Madrid, and into mid-December in Morocco. She was pushing seven months pregnant when she closed her 1958 season at the Casino Municipal de Tangier, returning to American soil forthwith. Her costumes were more than just a bit snug by the time the New Year arrived a few weeks later. It was clear the Dutch antipodist would be absent from the limelight for at least the next few months. Back in the States once again, she and Freddie were now rehearsing a new type of act: parenthood. As Chicago's frosty winter began warming into the upper 30s, Barbara Ann Van Voorden made her debut on the afternoon of March 13.

For the first time in years – maybe ever, actually – Miss Loni and Freddie were in hiatus from traveling and performing. For a jet-setting couple constantly on the go, the stage was suddenly dark and the only roar of the crowd came from an audience of one: Barbara Ann. It was only temporary. Within weeks of her little girl being born, Loni began getting herself back into exhibition mode, practicing a couple of hours each day in the cramped quarters of their Chicagoland apartment. Freddie kept his typewriter clacking day and night, reaching out to producers and agencies from one end of the country to the other. With a new baby in the picture, they agreed that it would be most practical to focus on stateside engagements only for the immediate future. And with being "at liberty" for three-plus months as a result of the basic child-bearing process, available spring bookings were sparse. By early summer, however, Loni's feet were again flitting about in the spotlight.

A two-column-wide picture of Loni graced the front page of *The Kentucky Post and Times Star* on Friday, July 3, confirming that "Lovely Miss Loni will present one of the most amazing foot juggling acts in the profession on Tuesday's opening program sponsored by the Devou [Kentucky] Park Community Sing Assn., in Devou's natural amphitheater."¹² Five days later, in the same publication, another front-page feature recapped the previously publicized

appearance: "Then came Miss Loni, a charming lady who could lie on her back and do tricks with her feet, spinning a ball and various objects with her toes and finally having one foot support a lamp while the other spun a cylindric bar. The crowd liked Miss Loni."¹³

A few months later, another newspaper documented Loni on the bill at the Waterloo, Iowa, Hippodrome on October 3: "A gal billed Miss Loni does it all lying down. She stretches out and keeps a ball, card, dumb bell or what have you spinning with her feet."¹⁴

Loni and Freddie were adjusting well to reclaiming their nomadic momentum. But between the traveling, rehearsing, and performing – sometimes into the early-morning hours – the added responsibilities of nurturing an infant along the trail was becoming more challenging. As additional engagements were being established for the remainder of the year and well into the next, a backup plan needed to be implemented. The solution fell into place equably and quickly. Since her parents had gone their separate ways after the passing of her brother, Loni's mother was no longer beholden to anyone or anything. She had come to terms with the loss of her son to the point of being able to regenerate her wellbe-



This shot picturing lovely Loni surrounded by three of Polack Bros. Circus's well-known buffoons, was a favorite of the press department in 1961. Al Ackerman is at Loni's immediate right shoulder, with Johnny Cirillino standing in front of him. To the right is Javier Esparza, professionally known as "Peluzo."

ing, and Freddie and Loni reached out to their daughter's namesake with the proposition of moving to the United States and becoming little Barbara's full-time nanny/babysitter. Grandmother Abeen jumped at the chance. She arrived early on in 1960 and watched over Barbara continually from that point onward. She resided with the family both on the road and ultimately at the Van Voorden home in southern Illinois, until her passing in 1976.

It was a big and impressive show, nestled into what many referred to be the "Golden Age" of Shrine circuses, with 20 top-notch acts flanked by plenty of showgirls and clowns, all working to the rhythm of a traditional circus band under the direction of Henry Kyes. Advertised as "A Sparkling Jewel Amongst Circuses of the World," the "Mammoth New" 1961 edition of Polack Bros. Circus opened its season on January 15 for a seven-day run at the Industrial Mutual Association Auditorium in Flint, Michigan, to near-capacity crowds. Neatly bookended between a myriad of wild animals, aerial daredevils, and funambulists was "MISS LONI - Dazzling and dexterous facility in the art of foot juggling."¹⁵ The Van Voordens identified the Polack show as their home away from home for the bulk of the year. The spectacle visited 50 cities in 19 different states, plus one Canadian province, between its January debut and mid-November closing in Charleston, West Virginia.¹⁶ It was the most extensive circus route Loni and Freddie had encountered since their Ringling adventure ten years prior, but this time they would drive every mile of it overland by themselves.

Walter Stebbins, who was Polack's director of publicity, instantly recognized Miss Loni's marketability to the mainstream media. He had arranged, with circus management's cooperation, two different publicity photo sessions focusing exclusively on their sizzling starlet: the first picturing Loni in wardrobe surrounded by some of the show's clowns, and another concentrating more on the candid mother-daughter relationship "behind the scenes". Stebbins and his representatives got a lot of mileage out of those pictures as the season continued. That movie-star-bombshell look, combined with the uniqueness of her talent, and now a cute-as-a-button toddler to help round out the total package – Loni had it all, and the press had a field day putting her on their pedestal wherever the show voyaged.

"There were 'Ladies Sections' in a lot of the newspapers at the time and that's where most of these articles showed up," Loni recalled.¹⁷ She repetitively became the subject of feature stories in major-city newspapers from Chicago to Los Angeles and all points north and south as well, with headlines proclaiming "Circus Glamor Girl Becomes Happy Mother behind Scenes," and "Mama Is Circus Foot Juggler".



The press often referred to Loni as the "best-dressed woman in the circus." Even on a fairgrounds grandstand lot, she was elegantly dressed with furs close at hand. She is seen here with her two-year old daughter Barbara Ann somewhere along the 1961 Polack Bros. route.

Loni was one hot topic. Simultaneously, Cecil B. DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth* was enjoying a second wave of success in re-release to theaters nationwide during this same time, which added even more fuel to her already well-burn-ing flame.

Despite the arduous schedule, the Van Voordens' year with Polack came and went. They covered thousands of miles and worked multiple hundreds of shows during that ten-month stretch. "It was pretty wearing. We drove and drove and drove," Loni recalled decades later. "We did [performed in] a lot of buildings, but worked a lot of outdoor places, too: ball parks and fairgrounds, especially out west. It was exhausting, but we liked it."¹⁸

Freddie was a remarkable correspondent. Even in the early stages of a completely booked season he was assiduously banging out letters to agents and producers everywhere, just keeping in touch. When a newspaper ran a spread on Loni, he would snap up a handful of copies and enclose one with his next dispatch. He made sure everyone knew that Miss Loni was gainfully employed through the fall and very much in demand immediately thereafter. It was a strategy that always paid off. Halfway through the Polack route, Freddie had begun putting out feelers for the following year.

There was no shortage of quality acts looking for work in the early 1960's, and the very best of them could pretty much pick and choose what they wanted to play, a luxury that no longer exists in today's show industry. Whereas spending an all-encompassing year with a circus had its advantages, there were also considerable drawbacks. You could spend a year, possibly even two, with any given show, but if you stayed with any one outfit too long, agencies and show operators assumed that you had found your niche elsewhere and were now out of the loop. Freddie understood the importance of not becoming branded a "circus only" act. The year 1962 would have to be a spot-date season, incorporating club dates, theatrical revues, fair dates, circuses, and whatever else might look promising. "Whatever else" was an underestimation.

The buzz from the West Coast was that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was moving ahead with plans to rejuvenate the Hollywood big-screen musical for a new decade, and the script they had chosen to get things rolling was a film adaptation of Billy Rose's 1935 New York Hippodrome production *Jumbo*.¹⁹ Starring Doris Day and Stephen Boyd, the motion picture would also feature Jimmy Durante, who starred in the original New York cast, and Martha Raye.²⁰

Once back at home in Chicago and shortly after closing with Polack, a letter arrived for Loni in care of agent Howard Schultz at his 203 North Wabash office, typewritten on Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc., stationery, and dated December 6, 1961:

"Dear Miss Loni:

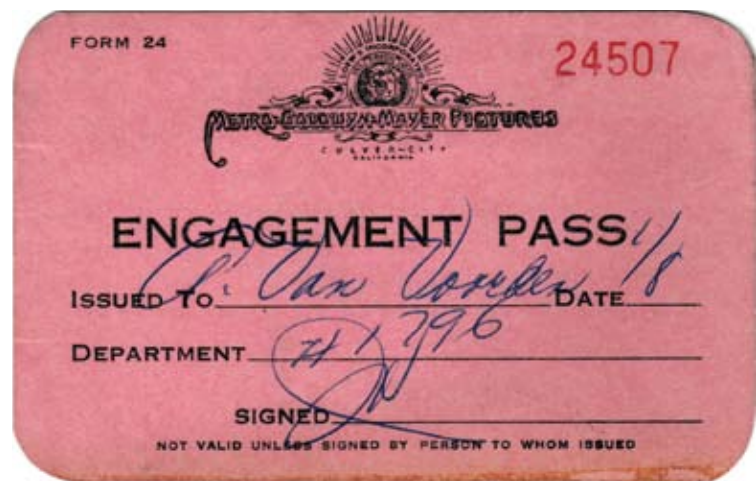
I can make you a definite offer for 'JUMBO' for two weeks guarantee with one week option, commencing on or about January 8th, 1962, at \$750 weekly less ten percent commission.

'On or about' means that the contract may commence on January 5th, 8th or 9th, depending on possible last minute shooting delays.

Advise your decision IMMEDIATELY!

With kindest regards,
Sincerely,

Al Dobritch²¹



Loni's signed engagement pass for entrance and access to the MGM studio lot during the filming of Billy Rose's *Jumbo*.

Loni and Freddie were Hollywood bound. A brief yet nonetheless significant paragraph in the July 22, 1962, *Los Angeles Times*, bearing the somewhat puzzling headline "Clown in Picture," confirmed the fact:

"Apolonia van Voorden, noted circus star, has been signed by Metro to make her screen debut in 'Billy Rose's *Jumbo*,' starring Doris Day, Stephen Boyd, Jimmy Durante and Martha Raye. Misss [sic] Voorden will perform her famous foot-juggling act in the film."²²

The *Times* mangled her name in print, identifying her as Apolonia instead of by her professional alias, Loni, and completely dropping the "Van" in "Van Voorden." The real calamity, however, was MGM's own lingering on-screen faux pas, in which Loni's name is misspelled as MISS LANI in the opening credits. Fortunately, her name appeared correctly on the paycheck and residuals that followed for years afterwards.

Unlike DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth*, which was staged and filmed using the immensity of Ringling's general personnel, the performers in *Jumbo* were contracted expressly for the creation of all circus sequences, most of which were shot on a Hollywood soundstage. In good company amidst the movie's all-star cast, Loni and Freddie were also surrounded by a swarm of well-respected circus artists, which included The Hannefords, Billy Barton, The Pedrolas (Gerda, Rudolf, and Dagmar Mootz), Victor Julian, Antar and Beverly Wazzan, Corky Cristiani, Pat Anthony, and several others.

Loni makes her screen appearance about 15 minutes into the running time of the picture, approximately one minute after the musical number *Over and Over Again* begins. As Doris Day fixes her stare on a somersaulting trampolinist, a large ball rolls toward her. Picking it up, she prattles "Here you are Loni," tossing it directly onto the antipodist's awaiting feet. Loni responds: "Thank you, Kitty," and for the next



In these reference stills, taken while rehearsing part of the "Over and Over Again" number, Loni is shown kicking her yet unpainted ball to performer Ron Henon, standing atop a platform in the first photo. Freddie keeps a watchful eye on the sphere's course, making sure all points connect. In the second image, Henon is shown on his giraffe-neck unicycle reaching out to catch the ball as it was to be filmed for the actual sequence.

ten-plus seconds, spins the ball on her pointed toe, tosses it upwards, and then kicks it from her feet into the hands of Ron Henon, perched atop his giraffe-neck unicycle.

Said ball (of which there were a few) becomes a designated point of focus throughout this specific scene, being passed off from artist-to-artist in alliance. But for every in-

coming man or beast to next accept and manipulate it, a different ball needed to be substituted to best incorporate its usage. At one point, the sphere lands on a seal's nose before being tossed back into Day's hands, and towards the end of the segment, what is purported to be that same ball resurfaces as a rolling globe, on which a showgirl is walking. The object Loni juggled with her feet could obviously not weigh the same as a rolling globe. For continuity's sake, Loni's own personal prop (a custom sewn leather ball containing an inflatable bladder) had to be repainted to match the numerous other "stunt balls" that were being used in succession. Metro's property department initially applied the wrong kind of paint to her ball, which promptly scuffed stained, and peeled off while filming, leaving noticeable blots and imperfections on accompanying props, costumes, and just about anything else it came in contact with, disrupting the shooting process until the ball could be suitably recoated.²³ As Doris and her congregation of circus songbirds build to their crescendo, Loni can be clearly seen in the ring, flawlessly running her four-pointed cross for about 18 seconds non-stop. Albeit formulaic, it is to this day an impressive and memorable highlight of the film.

Freddie and Loni's shooting schedule in California finished by the end of January. It was a rousing way to ring in the New Year. With their portion of *Jumbo* "in the can," they returned to Chicago to make ready for another year's worth of engagements for a host of different enterprises across the nation. Having networked with Al Dobritch for MGM's movie, another beneficial relationship had been consummated. Dobritch not only retained numerous motion picture and television associates; he, too, was a circus producer and proprietor, and booked acts into Las Vegas venues, as well. Miss Loni was part of his April 5-7 circus program in Erie, Pennsylvania, sandwiched in between several hotel showroom and club dates.

Their plan to remain stateside throughout 1962 proved productive. Miss Loni made up for lost time during her pregnancy and early child-rearing months, batting all over





MISS LONI
Featured In
Joe Pasternak's Production
"Billy Rose's JUMBO"
A Metro Goldwyn Mayer Release

A frame from the completed "Over and Over Again" production number in *Jumbo*, showing Doris Day tossing Loni's painted-up ball towards her eagerly awaiting feet. Al Dobritch added his own agency logo to the lower left corner of publicity glossies he sent out, along with the MGM studio logo in the opposite corner.

the country through December, performing everywhere from Chicago's Edgewater Beach Hotel to Constitution Hall, in Washington, D.C.²⁴ And thanks to Freddie's managerial talents, the following year was also lining up beautifully.

On the home front, Loni's mother, Barbara Abeen, had recently attained employment in the food services department of international flights, at O'Hare Airport, near Park Ridge, Illinois, where the Van Voordens had recently bought a mobile home. These developments offered Freddie, Loni and little Barbara Ann a more permanent dwelling when not on the road and provided the family with a stay-at-home



Taken by fellow performer Bobby Yerkes at Chicago's Navy Pier in 1962, this colorful image of Loni's signature "blackout" trick became one of her favorite publicity shots. The inflatable barbells and lanterns were wired with lights. In venues that could black out the house lights on command, all that could be seen was the glow of colored objects slowly twirling in the darkness. Freddie designed, built, and wired the apparatuses himself.

housesitter while away. It was the ideal setup.

Miss Loni launched her 1963 season on January 5, playing the showroom of the Sheraton Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky. Similar engagements continued solidly through February and to the end of March. She and Freddie then switched over into circus mode, working the Tangier Shrine Circus in Omaha from April 15-21, the St. Louis Police Circus from April 25-May 5, and then jumping over to Montreal, Quebec, for Al Dobritch's International Circus, May 18-25. One final engagement followed the spring circus work: a six-day run at the Vapors Theater in Hot Springs, Arkansas, from May 30-June 8.²⁵ Under normal circumstances, Freddie would have kept the trail of bookings going without a

pause; however, he and Loni needed a break to finalize some official business back in Cook County, Illinois.

On Tuesday July 9, 1963, Loni and Freddie Van Voorden became official citizens of the United States, sworn in by Judge Julius Jennings Hoffman in U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, Chicago.²⁶

Coincidentally, a month following their citizenship initiation/induction, the nation's newest foot juggler found herself performing in Washington, D.C. at the Carter Barron Amphitheater, on the International Showtime Circus bill.²⁷ This particular unit was a short-lived touring component linked to television's popular summer replacement variety weekly *International Showtime*. Hosted by American actor and comedian Don Ameche, the program showcased circus acts, magicians, and ice show performers from around the world. It aired from 1961 through 1965 over the NBC network. Of the collective 66 one-hour episodes originally produced, only four or five 16mm film prints are known to have survived. Although a few dates to appear on tour with Ameche were originally in the works, Loni ended up only doing the Washington stand.²⁸

From D.C., Freddie and Loni hopped over to Trois Rivières, Quebec for one week, working for ex-wire-walker

turned producer – and long-time friend – Hubert Castle. Then, returning stateside again after fulfilling the Canadian contract, they carried on into the fall and winter, playing an assortment of nightclubs, ballrooms, and trade shows, with an appearance on Chicago's live television program *Bozo's Circus* wedged amongst other bookings. As in the past, the next season had inevitably fallen into place in the blink of an eye.

Thirteen years had passed since American audiences had first laid eyes on Miss Loni amidst a sea of painted faces and spangles on Ringling-Barnum. She was now one of the world's top novelty entertainers, having conquered just about every facet of the show industry, from great theater stages globally to the big screen. As the world began to change – bowing to Beatles, scrutinizing skirt hems, and focusing on fads and follies good, bad, and indifferent – Loni managed to fit into the tapestry of all that made the Sixties swing. She was cool, sexy, and talented. Her turn simply “worked” in every setting. Circus goers were enthralled by her, night-clubbers adored her, and Vegas hipsters thought she was almost ethereal.

Former trapeze artist and long-time family friend Frank Clark (The Great Francarro) well remembered the first time he saw her work.

“I had heard that Loni was the featured act at the Edgewater Beach Hotel [in Chicago], so a few of us from the [chorus] line (I was dancing at the time) went to see the show. They introduced ‘Miss Loni’ in a blackout, and [when] the lights came on, there was Loni [in a spotlight]. Then she went over to the cradle, lay down, and a prop appeared in the darkness. She did a routine that was fast, like she usually worked – very clever – she then kicked it off into the dark, and you never saw it again. You didn’t hear it clump on the floor; you didn’t hear anything! But I knew where Freddie was, and he was working like lightning. Well, he was a dancer, and he was just everywhere, although nobody else knew he was there. She did the whole act like that. Freddie didn’t even come out for a bow, or anything. You never saw Freddie, and yet he was scurrying around like a madman. That presentation was so faultless. I never forgot it.”²⁹

Unquestionably, one of the most significant reasons for Loni's repeated success with show management was her consistency with the act. Her routine was so tightly regimented that it rarely varied by more than 30 seconds under any given situation. Show producers could rely on the accuracy of her running time from the moment her music began to the final cut, chord and chase of the score. She was a well-oiled machine that moved about like a velvet cat. And it was that professionalism that kept her in constant demand.

The first several weeks of their 1964 string of bookings



Miss Loni posing for the camera backstage before making her stage entrance. She made her own costumes, painstakingly beading and sewing each rhinestone and jewel by hand, one at a time.

placed Loni and Freddie on various Midwestern Shrine circuses in major cities like Minneapolis and Detroit. By the beginning of May, they would be seen on-stage at the Westchester Playhouse, in Yonkers, New York, spending a week with the latest incarnation of Harold Minsky's celebrated *Follies*.

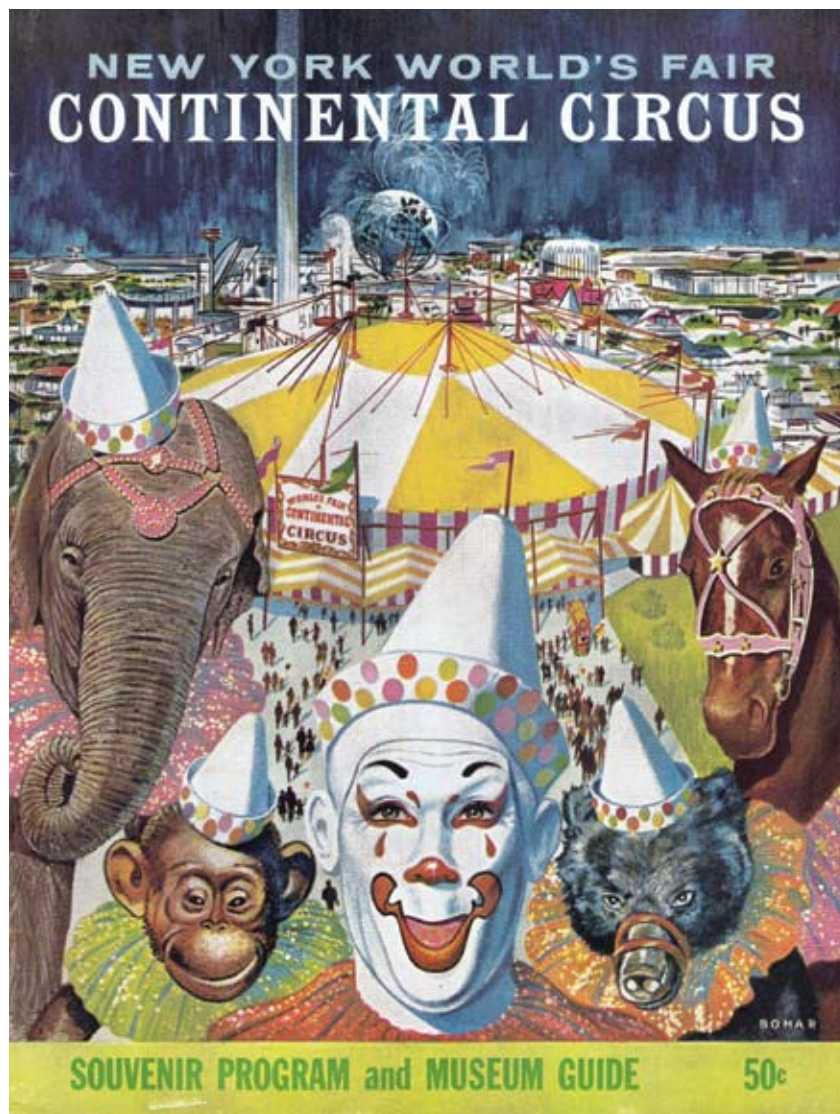
Loni would next appear for seven weeks – predominantly to a sea of empty seats: 5,000 of them to be exact – at the New York World's Fair, as one of the features in John Ringling North's Continental Circus. Emulating a European-style one-ringer, the 80-minute program included the Hanneford Riding Act, Woodcock Elephants, Flying Alexanders, and Rix's Bears. It was presented under a specially commissioned yellow and white plastic tent-like pavilion, with "poles that do not obstruct the view," as the fair guide proclaimed. The original pitch, which had been in the works for quite some time, was that the circus would run for seven months in 1964 from the fair's opening in April until its seasonal shutdown for the winter months in late October, and then reopen again for a comparable stretch during its second consecutive year in 1965. Al Dobritch agented the contract for Loni and a few other acts on the lineup as well. But by the time her actual contract arrived, 14 months over a two-year window starting in April ended up becoming only seven weeks beginning "on or about May 7"³⁰ with a "verbal only" option that never materialized.³¹

Unsanctioned by and therefore without the support of the Bureau of International Expositions (BIE) – the universal federation that administered these events – this 1964-65 pageant became plagued by financial scandal and misman-

agement from the planning stages onward, mostly attributed to the dubious procedures of the fair's appointed president Robert Moses. He had rejected the BIE's long-established requirements for producing such an event, which included the restriction of charging site rent to its exhibitors. BIE simply instructed their member nations not to participate, to which they conceded. In retaliation, but without revealing his complete disregard for their policies, Moses went to the media asserting that the Bureau refused to support the fair.

His exploits spawned a succession of bad press and public discord that tainted the festivities before the gates even opened to the public. When they finally did, on April 22, an onslaught of mishaps, botches, and malfunctions ensued. People stayed away in droves.

Freddie had written to agent Charles Hogan, on May 20, 1964, revealing "Business at the WORLD'S FAIR AMUSEMENT AREA is unbelievably bad....I've never seen anything like it. It doesn't look to me like they can hold out much longer; a few more weeks will tell the story."³² The circus barely managed to survive for a few months, thinning out talent as the summer progressed. The fact that the circus was not a free attraction at the fair didn't help. There was a one-dollar admission charge to the show, equivalent to about \$10.00 in today's

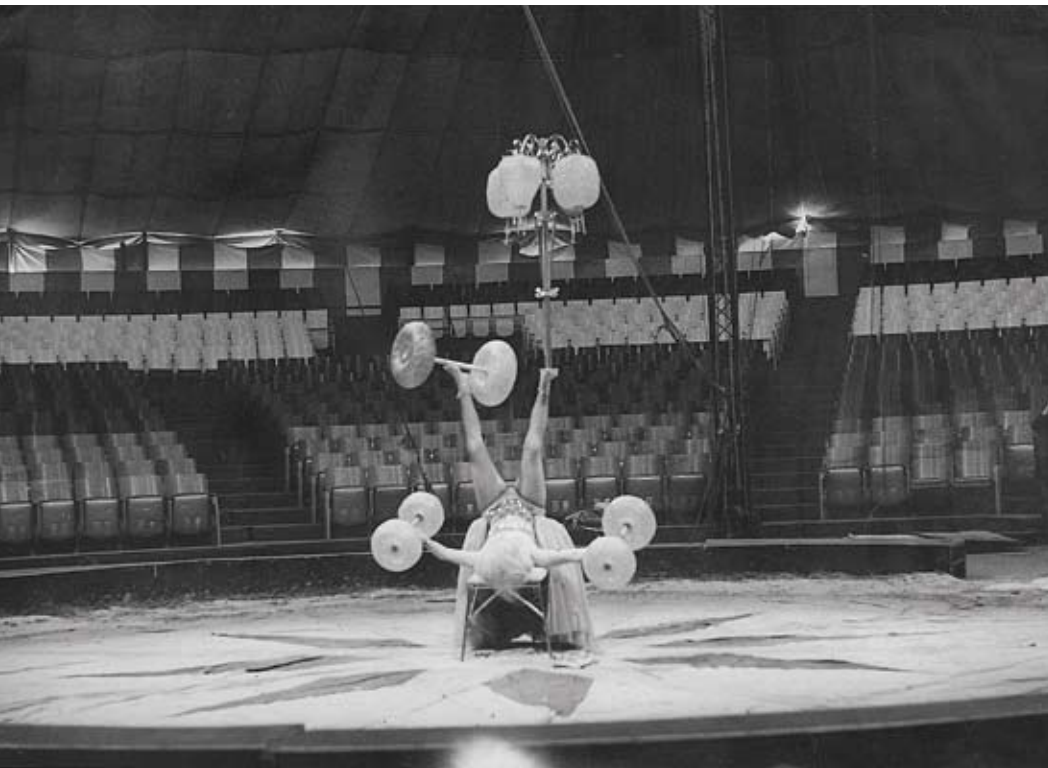


Artist Walter Bomar created this colorful image for the cover of the New York World's Fair Continental Circus program. Bomar did the artwork for all of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's programs from 1958 through 1966.

prices.

Realizing that the Continental Circus could close any day and without warning (a couple of the other shows on the grounds closed within mere weeks of the fair's beginning), Freddie quickly initiated a dialogue with Hogan and Harold Minsky about putting Loni back on the *Follies* itinerary if and when the fair went broke. Because the New York con-

tract was represented by Al Dobritch, this discussion was held in secrecy, without his knowledge. As in the past, Freddie's shrewdness was nothing short of clairvoyant. When Loni's contracted time at the fair, via Dobritch, reached its end – obviously with no chance of any “option” coming into play – Freddie's well-calculated scheme slipped into place. To



Miss Loni surrounded by a plethora of empty seats in the Continental Circus pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair. She once revealed that on more than a few occasions the show played to as few as three people in the audience.

everyone's good fortune and the delight of Minsky himself, Loni resumed his *Follies* tour in Wildwood, New Jersey, on July 3 and followed the route for an additional twelve weeks through the end of October, closing on the 28th at the Cork Club in Houston, Texas. Dobritch was off the hook regarding any options for New York. North's Continental Circus, did not return for the 1965 leg of the fair. All that remained where it initially stood was a vacant space.

Thanks mostly to Freddie, an untimely dilemma in scheduling was resourcefully avoided, resulting in a happy ending for everyone. While Loni was tip-toeing her props in Minsky's spotlight, at the end of July, she received her next query from Al Dobritch:

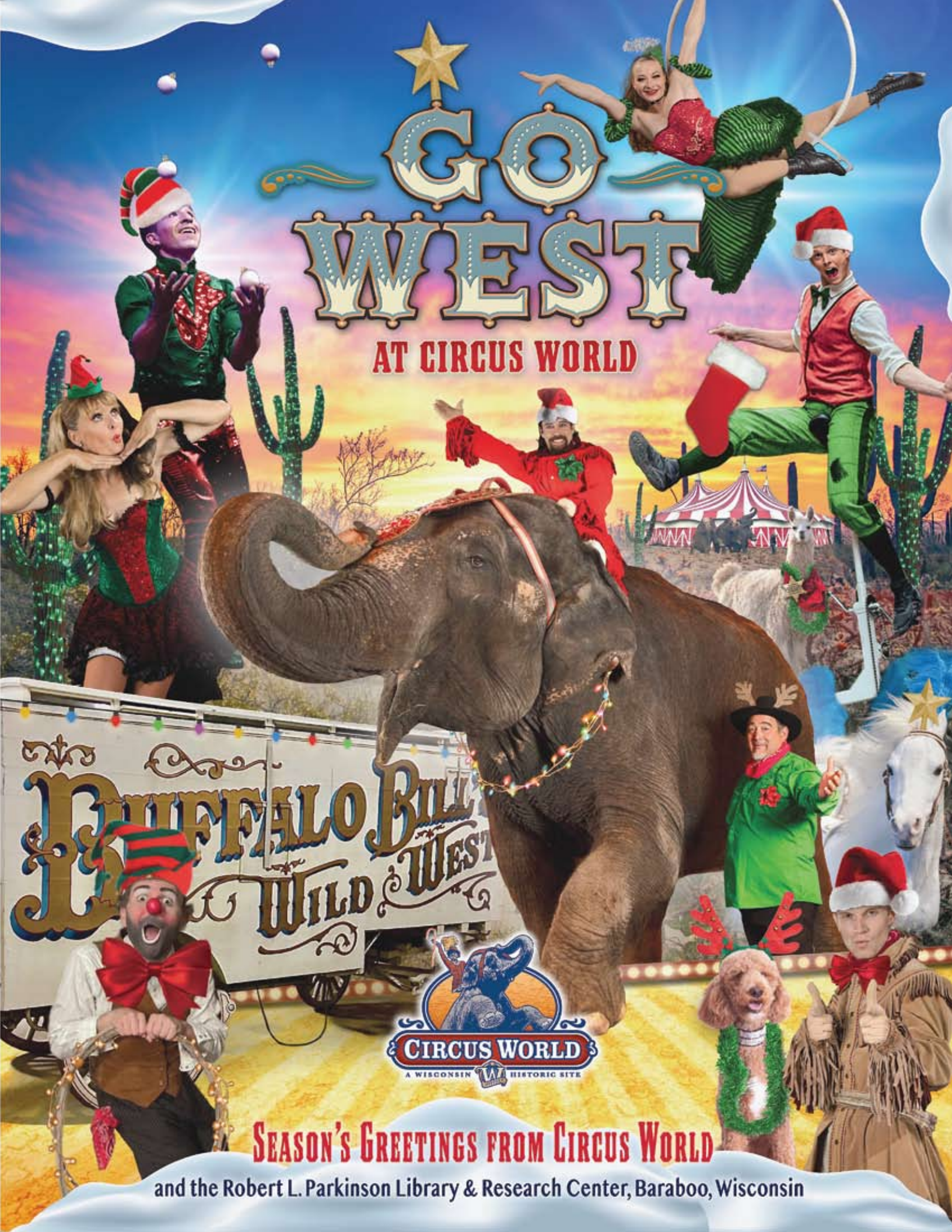
“Quote salary for a six-month engagement commencing on September 29th in Las Vegas.

With kindest regards, Sincerely,
Al Dobritch”³³ **BW**

To Be Continued

Endnotes

1. Unidentified newspaper clipping (translated from Dutch), c. Jan. 16 or 17, 1958, Tegge Circus Archives.
2. Author's undocumented conversations with Loni between 2005-2010.
3. Death announcement (translated from Dutch), Feb. 15, 1958, Tegge Circus Archives.
4. Author's undocumented conversations with Loni, Ibid.
5. Fred Van Voorden letter to Billy Marsh, Esq. dated Feb. 15, 1958, Tegge Circus Archives.
6. Fred Van Voorden letter to Eddy Marouani dated Mar. 26, 1958, Tegge Circus Archives.
7. “Miss Loni” business correspondence and contracts, Tegge Circus Archives.
8. Ibid.
9. Polack Bros. Circus route cards #1 through #8, 1959, Tegge Circus Archives.
10. Polack Bros Circus Souvenir Program and Magazine, 1959, Tegge Circus Archives.
11. Fred Van Voorden, telegram to Nellie Vaughn, Oct. 25, 1958, Tegge Circus Archives.
12. “Amazing Foot Juggler.” *The Kentucky Post and Times Star*, July 3 1959, p. 1.
13. “The Show Goes On, Despite Irritations,” *The Kentucky Post and Times Star*, July 8, 1959, p. 1.
14. “Betty Johnson Warms Congress Show Crowd,” *Waterloo Sunday Courier*, Oct. 4, 1959, p. 3.
15. Polack Bros Circus Souvenir Program and Magazine, 1961, Tegge Circus Archives.
16. Polack Bros. Circus route cards # 1 through 7, 1961, Tegge Circus Archives.
17. Author's undocumented conversations with Loni, op. cit.
18. Interview with Loni Van Voorden conducted by Timothy Noel Tegge in Highland, Illinois, Mar. 15, 2007.
19. “Conquest of Mars Told by Bradbury: MGM Will Picturize Novel; Walter Explains ‘Jumbo’ Yen,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 15, 1960, Section IV, p. 9.
20. “Ed Addeo: Rod Taylor In at 20th,” *Los Angeles Evening Citizen News*, Dec. 4, 1961, p. 14.
21. Al Dobritch letter to Miss Loni c/o Howard Schultz dated Dec. 6, 1961, Tegge Circus Archives.
22. “Clown in Picture,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 22, 1962, p. 27.
23. Author's undocumented conversations with Loni, op. cit.
24. “Miss Loni” business correspondence and contracts, Tegge Circus Archives.
25. Ibid.
26. “Jugglers Now Belong To U.S.,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 10, 1963, p. 12.
27. “Ameche Show,” *Baltimore Sun*, Aug. 4, 1963, p. 48.
28. “Miss Loni” business correspondence and contracts, Tegge Circus Archives.
29. Interview with Frank Clark conducted by Timothy Noel Tegge in Sarasota, Florida, June 20, 2022.
30. AGVA Standard Form of Artists Engagement Contract between Al Dobritch and Loni, dated May 7, 1964, Tegge Circus Archives.
31. Author's undocumented conversations with Loni, op. cit.
32. Fred Van Voorden letter to Charles E. Hogan dated May 20, 1964, Tegge Circus Archives.
33. Al Dobritch letter to Loni dated July 22, 1964, Tegge Circus Archives.



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The owner is Circus Historical Society, Inc; 1075 W. Fifth Ave; Columbus OH 43212-2629. Known bondholders, mortgagees & other security holders owning 1% or more of total bond, mortgages or other securities: none. Tax status has not changed during preceding 12 months.

Issue frequency is quarterly.

The average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months is (a) Total copies printed: 1,158; (b1) Mailed outside-county paid subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies): 529. (b3) Paid distribution outside the mails including sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales,

and other paid distribution outside USPS: 376. (b4) Paid distribution by other classes of mail through USPS (first class): 253. (c) Total paid distribution: 1,158. (f) Total distribution: 1,158. (g) Copies not distributed: 0. (h) Total: 1,158. (i) Percent paid: 100%.

Number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date is (a) Total copies printed: 786. (b1) Mailed outside-county paid subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies): 577. (b3) Paid distribution outside the mails including sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales, and other paid distribution outside USPS: 123. (b4) Paid distribution by other classes of mail through USPS (first class): 86. (c) Total paid distribution: 786. (f) Total distribution: 786. (g) Copies not distributed: 0. (h) Total: 786. (i) Percent paid: 100%.

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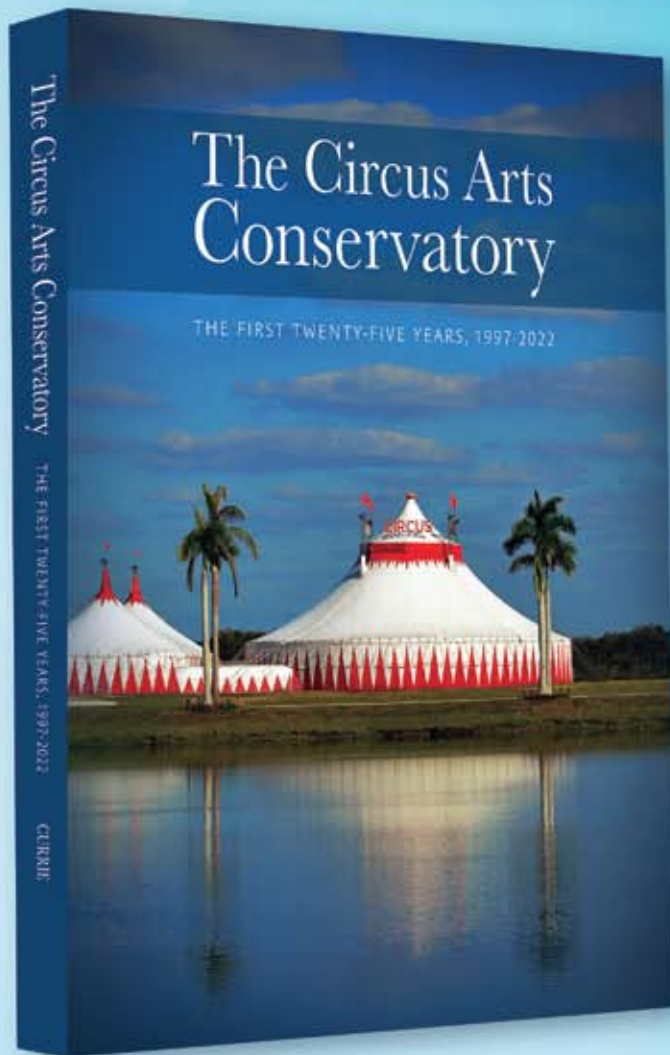
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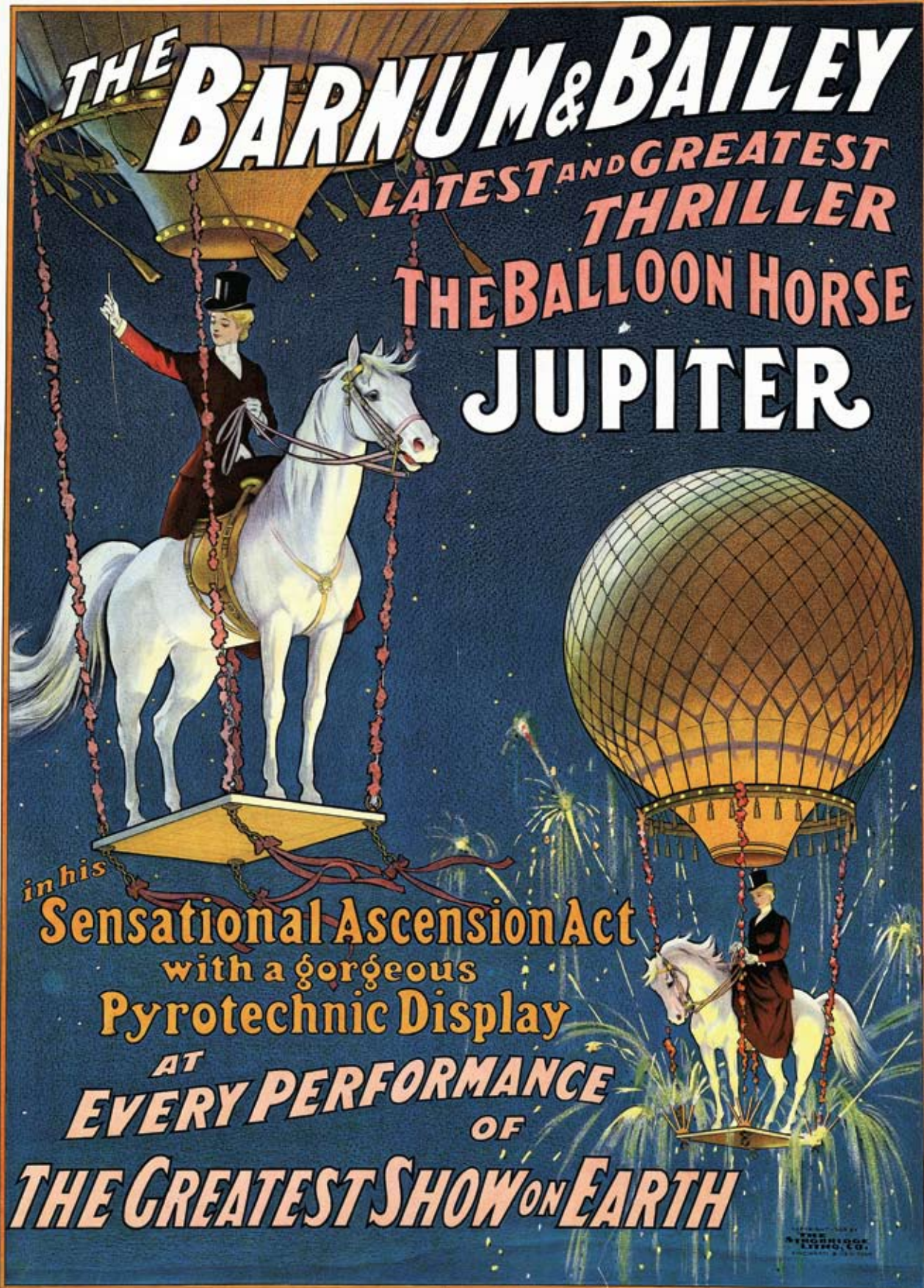
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